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"NEW YORK"

**George Munro**

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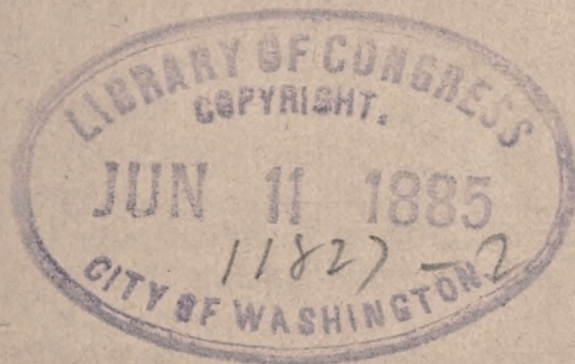
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THE

# Prima Donna's Husband.

✓  
By F. DU BOISGOBEY.



NEW YORK:  
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# THE PRIMA DONNA'S HUSBAND.

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## CHAPTER I.

THE walls of the little *salon* are hung with silk. A bright fire is blazing in the grate. Heavy curtains of rich satin conceal the windows.

Without, the sleet dashes fiercely against the panes, but the cold does not penetrate this cozy nest, which is a fit place for the exchange of lovers' vows and tender confidences.

In front of the fire sits a lady half buried in the depths of a large arm-chair, and playing listlessly with a Japanese screen. She is alone, and the subdued light of the magnificent Sèvres lamp falls upon a face whose pallor is heightened by the black lace scarf which she has thrown about her head after the Spanish fashion.

Silent and motionless she sits abstractedly watching the play of the flame, her thoughts evidently far from this charming retreat. Of what is she dreaming? Is she waiting for the man she loves, or is she troubled by a presentiment of approaching misfortune? Occasionally she lifts her eyes, and watches the movements of the clock's hands as they slowly make their way around the dial; then she resumes her former despondent attitude, a fit model for a statue of Despair—the mute despair of the *Mater Dolorosa*, whom the great painters of the sixteenth century have so often portrayed upon her knees, at the foot of the cross.

Yet this woman is beautiful; this woman is rich; this woman adores her husband.

She married him because she adored him, and in order to marry him she renounced the operatic stage where she had long shone as a star of the first magnitude.

Her husband had nothing whatever in common with the ruined noblemen who repair the breaches dissipation has made in their fortune by means of the talent of a celebrated cantatrice. He was born rich, and the greater part of his patrimony was still in his possession at the time of his marriage.

She, on her side, had made no sacrifice in relinquishing her artistic triumphs to assume a title and one of the oldest names in France; but she would have married the Count de Listrac even if he had been poor and of obscure origin, for she infinitely preferred him to all the other adorers who persistently followed in her train, in spite of her pitiless rebuffs.

She had refused the hand of more than one millionaire banker,



and even a morganatic marriage with a royal highness from beyond the Rhine.

And strangest of all, for five years they had enjoyed unclouded happiness—five years which had passed like a single day.

The daughter of a poor Italian musician, Clara Monti, had entered the highest society on a footing of perfect equality, and had deported herself with credit there. Indeed her talent and her conduct, even more than her beauty, had given her an incontestable place among the women who constitute the feminine aristocracy of Paris.

George de Listrac, transformed by conjugal love, renounced his former habits; the leaders of the *demi monde* seemed to have forgotten him; he no longer played heavily, and was rarely seen at the club. He still loved horses, and he had acquired a fondness for speculation; but he devoted to his wife all the time not engrossed by his horses and his business.

It is true that he said very little to her about his stock speculations and his operations on the turf; but she had unbounded confidence in his judgment—and in his fidelity. Nevertheless, for six months past she had noticed that George was subject to a preoccupation, whose cause she had vainly attempted to discover. George himself declared that she was mistaken, and had put her misgivings to flight more than once by a tender kiss or caress; but the present year had begun badly. The count seemed more and more preoccupied, and often appeared to lose himself entirely in his gloomy reflections. Not unfrequently he spent entire evenings without saying a single word, and when Clara gently questioned him, he replied like a man suddenly aroused from a dream.

At a loss to account for this evident depression, Clara had finally begun to ask herself if he had not fallen under the thrall of one of his old sweethearts, and as she was too proud to disclose these suspicions she suffered in silence.

But that very day she had received a visit from one of her husband's relations, an exceedingly plain-spoken and uncharitable dowager, who had insinuated to Clara that she would do well to watch George more closely, as he was paying marked attention to a handsome widow, who was considered by no means indifferent to him, and had endangered his fortune by some very rash speculations. A failure to meet his obligations was predicted on every side, and this excellent Marquise de Marvejols had called expressly to warn Clara of the twofold misfortune that threatened her: desertion and financial ruin.

Clara had dryly replied that she was sure of her husband's devotion, and that pecuniary losses troubled her very little. Nevertheless, in her secret heart, she was very uneasy. George had left her about noon, and at seven o'clock she received a short note, only a couple of lines, in which he begged her not to wait dinner for him.

It was now midnight, and he had not yet returned. Where could he be? At the house of this fascinating widow, against whom the dowager had just warned her? Clara would not believe it. With some of his business friends? Certainly not. Business matters are transacted in the day-time. Could some accident have befallen



him? In that case he would have been brought home, or his wife would certainly have been summoned.

But no letter, or even message, had been received since the brief note brought by a liveried footman, who must have come from some club or restaurant.

The countess had ordered a footman to watch for his master's return and to inform her as soon as he arrived; but by half-past twelve her anxiety became insupportable, and thinking the servant might have forgotten her instructions she rang for him.

The summons was promptly answered, and without waiting for his mistress to question him, the servant said:

"The count has not returned, but Monsieur de Moulières wishes to know if madame will have the kindness to see him."

"Monsieur de Moulières, here, at this hour!" exclaimed the young wife. "What can it mean?"

"Monsieur de Moulières has called at my master's request, I believe."

"Show him in," said Clara, rising hastily. Under any other circumstances she certainly would not have received at this late hour a man with whom she was but slightly acquainted, though he was very intimate with her husband. He was no favorite with her, but he doubtless brought her tidings of importance, and it was M. de Listrac who had sent him, so she could not refuse to see him.

She waited for him, standing, resolved to shorten the interview as much as possible.

He entered with head erect, and a smile upon his lips, exactly as he would have entered a drawing-room during a five o'clock tea.

He was certainly over forty, but his face bore no marks of age, and he dressed with such care and taste that he might still hope to make conquests in the feminine world. His had been numerous, it was said; but perhaps they were due as much to a wholesome fear of him as to his personal attractions.

"Madame," he began, after saluting the lady with a deferential bow, "you will, I am sure, excuse me for intruding at this late hour when I tell you—"

"What has happened to my husband?" cried Clara. "Is he badly injured?"

"No, madame, but—"

"Then why did he send you here instead of coming himself?"

"He did not send me, though I took the liberty of saying so, as this is one of the occasions when it becomes the duty of an intimate friend to infringe upon the proprieties."

"I was ignorant that you were such a particular friend of Monsieur de Listrac," said the countess, rather scornfully. "But what has happened?"

"I am surprised that you can not guess. The financial losses which your husband sustained to-day are known to all Paris."

"What she said was true, then," murmured Mme. de Listrac, suddenly recollecting his relative's warning.

"Then am I to understand that his operations at the Bourse have ruined him irretrievably?" she asked.

"I hope not; but he has been seriously affected by the crash. George invested heavily in the Union Générale, and that went



under at noon to-day. He had seemed greatly depressed when he reached the club, where he found plenty of companions in affliction, for many of his friends have been equally unfortunate."

Clara hung her head to conceal her emotion. The news did not overpower her, but she wondered why George had concealed his rash speculations from her, and why, after the catastrophe, his first thought had not been to confide his troubles to her.

"He found plenty of company, as I said before," continued the visitor, "and all the victims dined together at the club. After dinner they began to play cards, and they are at it still. I left Listrac losing heavily, and though I tried my best to get him away from the table, I did not succeed, so I thought it best to come and tell you of his danger."

"I am greatly obliged to you, sir," rejoined Clara, drawing herself up haughtily, "but you might have spared yourself the trouble of coming here in the middle of the night. My husband is master of his own actions, and you can hardly suppose that I am going to the club to prevent him from playing."

"I confess that I did think so. I do not insist upon it, of course, but you will realize, sooner or later, that it was my duty to warn you. The case is an urgent one, and you alone can save George. To-morrow it will perhaps be too late."

The countess rang. When the footman made his appearance she turned to him quietly and said:

"Show this gentleman out."

M. des Moulières bowed and left the room without uttering another word, but not without bestowing an anything but friendly glance upon Mme. de Listrac.

She had managed to control herself in this man's presence, but as soon as she was alone she burst into a fit of sobbing.

"If it were only the loss of the money," she murmured, "I would not mind; but he has ceased to love me. If he still loved me he would have told me all. He knows that I am ready to sacrifice all I possess to save him. The marquise did not deceive me. I have every reason to believe that he is really in love with this Madame de Benserade, about whom there has been so much gossip since her husband's death. I must know; and if this be indeed true —"

Clara did not finish the sentence, but her impassioned gesture expressed more plainly than any words her firm desire to avenge her wrongs.

Then reflection came. She said to herself that perhaps she accused George unjustly, that he was guilty only of imprudence in business, that she ought not to condemn him without a hearing, much less to abandon him, and that M. de Moulières' advice was perhaps worth following.

It never once occurred to her that this man had been merely setting a trap for her in giving her this advice. She thought only of regaining her influence over her husband.

Ringling for her maid, she said to her hastily, "Quick, my cloak and bonnet!"

"Is madame going out?" inquired the astonished servant.

"Yes, I am going to meet Monsieur de Listrac at the house of



Madame de Marvejols. It is not worth while to have the horses harnessed. Send Pierre for a carriage. I shall be back in an hour. You need not wait for me. I can undress without your assistance."

A Parisienne would have remained at home, knowing full well that the poorest of all ways to win back a recreant husband is to run after him; but Clara was incapable of calculation or moderation. She loved as women loved in the middle ages in Florence, where she was born. She loved with the same intensity of tenderness and of jealousy; and with an ardor that would impel her to commit any crime if her husband deceived her. In her youth she had been deeply in love with a man whom she was about to marry when he died a violent and mysterious death. Since that time her heart had throbbed only for George de Listrac. Ten years after the tragedy that had cast a gloom over her youth, she met George at Vienna, and married him three months afterward.

After five years of wedded life her love for her husband was as ardent as ever. She lived only in George, and for George, and now, threatened with the loss of his affection, she resolved to know her fate.

Ten minutes after giving her orders to her maid, Clara was rolling swiftly along through the muddy and foggy streets. She had left her palatial home in the middle of the night to start out in search of her liege lord exactly as the wife of an humble laborer might start out in pursuit of a husband who is lying half drunk in a beer-shop.

This comparison occurred to her as she bowled swiftly along, and she said to herself that her humble sister was no more to be pitied, and certainly less perplexed than herself.

Such a woman would not hesitate to enter the wine-shop and drag her husband from it, by force if necessary; but the Countess de Listrac could not enter the club-house and take George from the card-table where he was squandering his substance in fashionable and titled company. Besides, what would her husband say? Would not his wounded pride rebel against this surveillance on her part, and so alienate him from her forever.

To lose George for the sake of saving a little money. The bare thought of such a thing made her shudder, and more than once she was on the point of ordering the coachman to take her back to her home.

But it was fated that she should pursue unto the bitter end the dangerous course upon which she had so imprudently entered. Her jealousy regained the ascendancy. The suspicion that M. de Moulieres had been sent by her husband to furnish a plausible explanation of his prolonged absence occurred to her, for the count had dined and spent the evening at the club scarcely half a dozen times since his marriage. Clara felt almost certain that he was now at the house of Mme. de Benserade, instead of at the club as his friend had declared.

To convict George of falsehood, therefore, Clara had only to satisfy herself that he was not at the club, and then return home to wait until he should come and repeat the story invented by his accomplice.

These suppositions seemed extremely improbable, but Clara was no longer in a condition to reason calmly.



Besides, she had reached her destination. The carriage had paused near an imposing doorway, which she recognized, as George had once pointed it out to her, and behind four or five other vehicles that were standing there.

Here Clara's real difficulties began. Should she leave her carriage, enter this brilliantly lighted vestibule, and make her wishes known to the footmen who were probably in waiting at the foot of the staircase? What would these lackeys think to hear her ask for the Count de Listrac? Would they take her for a girl in search of her lover, or see in her a woman deceived by her husband? And if she should be so unfortunate as to meet one of George's friends, what would he think to see her there at such an hour?

She finally decided that the best thing she could do would be to make the coachman who had just descended from the box to open the door for her, her messenger, so she begged him to inform the *concierge* of the establishment that a lady wished to speak to M. de Listrac without delay. She took good care to pronounce the name distinctly, and even to repeat it, so there could be no possible mistake.

"All right, my little lady," replied the coachman. "You need have no fears. Your message shall be faithfully delivered, and my horse will not move an inch. He has been in the harness ever since six o'clock this morning."

Clara watched the coachman and saw him disappear under the archway just as a gentleman came out with a cigar in his mouth, a cane under his arm, and both hands in the pockets of his overcoat, the collar of which had been turned up to protect him from the cold. Clara started violently, for she instantly recognized George, though his face was almost entirely concealed from view.

"I wronged him," she murmured, breathless with joy. "He was really at the card-table. Ah! everything else matters little now I know that he is not deceiving me. I will run to him, throw myself in his arms, confess my fault and entreat him to forgive me for my unjust suspicions!"

She was about to spring out upon the pavement when a thought suddenly deterred her. "What if he should be angry with me on account of my escapade?" she said to herself. "Why should I subject him to any such annoyance? It will be far better for me to return home in advance of him, and when the coachman comes back I will tell him to take me there with all possible speed."

M. de Listrac, little suspecting that his wife was watching him, seemed to be in no haste. He had paused after walking a few steps, and now seemed to be gazing with strange persistency at the carriages drawn up by the edge of the sidewalk.

"What can he be looking for?" murmured the countess, already becoming anxious. "Can it be that he is looking for me? Impossible. The coachman passed him in the doorway, so George can not know that I am waiting for him, and yet, he is certainly coming this way. He must have seen me, incredible as it appears."

It did indeed appear incredible, the more so from the fact that the carriage stood in the shadow, behind a coupé drawn up almost directly under a street lamp a little further on.

Clara looked out, and saw a woman's hand daintily gloved sud-



denly extended from the open window of this coupé, and waved as if for a signal.

There was no longer any possible room for doubt. This gesture explained the movements of the Count de Listrac, who now hastened toward the vehicle with the quick step of a lover eager to join his divinity.

Clara was wounded to the heart. All her recent illusions vanished, and the shock was so severe that though she felt a wild desire to spring into the carriage, and throw herself between George and her rival, her voice failed her, and she had not even strength to move.

George advanced without noticing the shabby hackney coach at the end of the line of carriages. He seemed to have eyes only for the handsomely appointed coupé whose occupant was so evidently expecting him.

The lady's hand was withdrawn after it had pressed his, and after the interchange of a few laughing remarks, the count stepped into the carriage, first giving the livered coachman an order, however.

Clara could not distinguish the words, but she heard the laughter, and the torture she endured equaled any that Dante invented for the wretches in his Inferno.

Her own coachman had reappeared, and approaching the door just as the coupé started off, he said:

"You are unlucky, my little lady. The gentleman has just left. He has been gone only about five minutes they say."

The man's hoarse voice roused the countess from the torpor that paralyzed her movements and her will.

"Do you see that coupé?" she asked, brusquely. "Follow it until it stops. You shall have a louis if you keep in sight of it."

Stimulated by this promise of a handsome reward, the coachman sprung upon the box and plied his whip so vigorously that the horse, tired as he was, started off at a gallop.

The coupé was not far in advance, and Clara's coachman would have no difficulty in keeping up with it unless the race was a long one.

"It is she, I am certain of it," muttered the countess, "it is the unscrupulous widow who has stolen George's heart from me. Where are they going? To her house probably."

But on reaching the boulevard the coupé turned to the left. This was not the direction the Baroness de Benserade would take to reach her residence on the Rue de Suresnes, and Clara, who was aware of this fact, began to feel a little hope. She might be mistaken, as she had not seen the lady's face, and it was such a trial to her to condemn George that she racked her imagination to invent some satisfactory explanation of his conduct.

Finally, the coupé, after proceeding some distance down the Boulevard des Italiens, turned into the Rue Marivaux, and paused at the first door on the right-hand side.

"The Café Anglais!" exclaimed Clara, in hollow tones. "She has come here to sup with George! I will kill her!"

From her carriage window the countess saw her husband spring lightly to the sidewalk, and then turn to assist his companion to alight.



"Is that the baroness?" Mme. de Listrac said to herself, gazing hard at her rival, who was wrapped in a fur-lined mantle, and closely veiled. It was impossible to catch a glimpse either of her face or her figure; besides, she passed swiftly on leaning on George's arm, and in another moment they had both disappeared from view through the doorway of the restaurant.

The coupé then moved off in the direction of the Place de l'Opera, and the chasseur of the establishment hastened up to open the door of the carriage in which poor Clara sat, desperately wondering what she had better do, for she was utterly unprepared for this sudden termination of her chase.

The chasseur, however, furnished her with the pretext she was vainly seeking.

"Madame is with that lady and gentleman, I presume," he said, lifting his gold-trimmed cap politely.

"Yes," replied Mme. de Listrac.

And without allowing herself any more time for reflection she hastily alighted.

The chasseur, armed with an umbrella, escorted her to the foot of the staircase, called a waiter, and then hastened back to offer his services to the occupants of another carriage that had just stopped in front of the door.

Clara had gone too far to retreat, as she ascended the stairs bravely. In the first landing she was met by a waiter who asked her the same question that the chasseur had asked. She made the same response, and he turning to another factotum of the establishment, said:

"Show this lady to the green room."

This waiter, however, knew his business, and surveying the countess with a critical eye, replied in a tone full of dignity:

"Fardon me, madame, but the gentleman who just came in is expecting no one."

"That makes no difference," replied Mme. de Listrac. "I wish to see him. Go and tell him so."

"I regret that I am unable to comply with madame's request. The gentleman particularly requested that he should not be disturbed upon any pretext whatever."

The hypocritical conduct of this subordinate irritated Clara beyond endurance, and had she known where the green room was she would doubtless have attempted to force her way into it, but she soon realized that this would be a mistake, and that she would accomplish nothing by violence.

"Very well," said she. "Show me to a private room where I can find the necessary materials for writing to this gentleman. You can then take him my letter, and see if he does not answer my summons."

The waiter hesitated. He had been employed at the Café Anglais ten years, and knew George de Listrac well. But he did not know that gentleman's wife, and he wondered if this lady who insisted so strongly upon seeing him could really be the countess. He was trying to devise some means of satisfying the lady without compromising an old patron of the house when a vigorous peal of the



bell resounded from one of the rooms opening into the same passage where he was parleying with the visitor.

This summons came from the very room in which he had installed the couple of whom the lady was in search, and the Count de Listrac, who did not like to be kept waiting, was quite capable of coming out to accelerate the movements of the waiters if necessary.

A scene must be prevented at all hazards, and the shrewd waiter thought it advisable to guard against it by ushering the lady into a private room without delay.

As he turned to do so a gentleman who had just ascended the stairs found himself face to face with the countess.

"You here, madame," he exclaimed, hastily, doffing his hat.

"I will explain what I am doing here," the countess replied, forcing herself to appear calm, for though she would have avoided this meeting if possible it did not shake her resolution in the least.

"Are you alone?" she continued.

"Entirely alone. I just left the opera, and feeling hungry, the idea of dropping in here occurred to me. I congratulate myself upon it since it has enabled me to meet you again after so many years, and if I can be of the slightest service to you pray command me."

The countess hesitated a moment, then she replied:

"Yes, you *can* render me a great service."

"In what way? I shall be only too happy."

"Invite me to take supper with you."

"Nothing would please me better," responded the new-comer, now thoroughly astonished.

The waiter, who had listened to this conversation, lost no time in opening a private room, and the countess hastily entered it, followed by her acquaintance.

"Does madame still desire writing materials?" inquired the waiter, lighting the candles in the candelabra.

"No, I have changed my mind. This gentleman will order supper. Now leave us."

When the countess and her companion were left alone together they stood gazing at each other in silence for some time, he wondering how this incomprehensible adventure was going to end; she, not knowing how to begin her explanation, and apparently waiting for him to question her.

"Are you familiar with this restaurant?" she at last asked brusquely. "Yes? Then you can tell me whether or not it has two entrances?"

"I think not," replied the gentleman. "During the day time one can come up here through the public dining-room that opens upon the boulevard, but at this hour that part of the restaurant is closed."

"Then any person who may be taking supper here can not leave the establishment without passing the room in which we now are. That is all I care to know. Will you do me the favor to leave the door partly open?"

He obeyed, but evidently thought she must have lost her senses since he saw her last.

"Are you watching for some one?" he inquired.



"Yes; and I count upon your assistance."

"The deuce! The task you assign to me is not an agreeable one by any means. Before I promise you my aid I must understand—"

"You know that I am married."

"I know that only too well. It was your marriage that made you leave the stage, and that blighted my most cherished hopes. I have not forgotten the past, and when I heard the fatal news I nearly died of grief and disappointment. I loved you so much—"

"And I loved another. Do you know my husband?"

"Only by sight. He has been pointed out to me since my return to Paris. I arrived here three days ago. I remained five years at St. Petersburg without once asking for leave of absence. I was afraid to see you again, and now I bless the strange chance that has brought us together."

"I too bless it. But for you I could not have remained here and they would have escaped me."

"What do you wish me to do?"

"To seat yourself upon that sofa and tell me when you see my husband pass. He entered this restaurant a few moments ago with a lady, and now, thanks to you, I can remain here until they leave the establishment."

"And then?"

"I do not know what I shall do; but whatever happens I shall be eternally grateful to you."

"Can you suppose that I would consent to act the part of a spy? Besides, what can you hope to gain by such a course as you propose? Your project is absurd. Do you think of winning Monsieur de Listrac back to his allegiance by taking him publicly to task in the hall of a fashionable restaurant?"

"That is not my object. I desire revenge."

"And how do you propose to obtain it? By stabbing him or by throwing vitriol in your rival's face?"

The conversation was interrupted by the entrance of a waiter who had come to take the order for supper.

"Oysters, a cold partridge, and some claret," said Clara's improvised defender, ordering the first dishes that came into his head.

This rejected suitor was no count, but plain Albert Dartige, and he wrote the name without an apostrophe, though he had adopted a profession in which titles are particularly useful, for he was a secretary of legation. Well born, good-looking, and the possessor of an income of eighty thousand francs, he was a general favorite with gentlemen, and a veritable Adonis in the eyes of all ladies except Clara, who, by virtue of the law of contrasts, admired only light-complexioned men.

The waiter did not insist upon any additions to this rather meager bill of fare. He saw that supper was but a secondary consideration with these guests, so he hastily withdrew, closing the door behind him.

This door Clara instantly opened, and then seated herself upon the sofa which M. Dartige seemed so little inclined to occupy.

"Then you still persist in your absurd idea of confronting Monsieur de Listrac when he appears?" asked M. Dartige.

"You need have no fears. I shall not compromise you," replied



Clara, bitterly. "There shall be no scandal here in this restaurant. I shall content myself with following my husband when he leaves it in company with that woman. I shall have no further need of your protection then. You will be at liberty to depart, and George will never know that you were with me."

"Do you fancy that I am afraid of him?" asked the young secretary, drawing himself up haughtily.

"No, but you are not interested in the matter, and I do not wish you to espouse my cause."

"Then you will, I am sure, permit me to retire, for I seem to be playing a most ridiculous rôle here."

The countess did not reply. She was listening breathlessly to the sound of a voice from without, and trying to see through the half-open door what was passing in the corridor.

Suddenly this door, yielding to the pressure of a vigorous hand, flew wide open, and the Count de Listrac strode into the room with eyes flashing, and his hat upon his head.

Beholding this unexpected apparition, Clara rose, and M. Dartige stepped hastily forward in order to place himself between her and her incensed husband.

The count pushed the door to with his foot, then said, coldly:

"What are you doing here, madame?"

"I came in search of you," replied the countess, unflinchingly.

"It is for me to question you."

"What do you dare to insinuate?"

"Ask your companion. Why did you not bring her with you. The explanation would have been more easy and more complete. This woman called for you at the club where you were waiting for her. Will you have the audacity to deny that? I followed you, and saw you enter this restaurant in company with her."

"I suspected as much, and I will reply to our charges when you have told me why I find you here with this gentleman. Will you try to convince me that you met him purely by chance on the restaurant staircase?"

"That was really the case," interrupted Albert Dartige. "You are at liberty to believe it or not, as you please; but I swear it, upon my word of honor as a gentleman, and I allow no one to question my veracity."

"And who are you, sir?" demanded the Count de Listrac, scornfully.

"Here is my card," replied Dartige. "I do not need yours, for I know who you are, and whenever it may please you to send your seconds to me you will find me ready to confer with them."

"You may expect them to-morrow morning, and I notice that you admit having given me just grounds of offense. Your proposal to fight is equivalent to a confession of guilt."

"That I absolutely deny."

"Ah!" remarked Listrac, after examining the card, "I now understand the rôle you are playing here. You were acting as secretary of legation in Vienna several years ago, I believe."

"Yes, sir."

"And madame was then singing at the Court Theater. I have heard of you, and am aware that you paid her a great deal of atten-



tion at the time. We have an old account to settle, it would seem; and I am delighted to have met you. I regret, however, to have interrupted a *tête-à-tête* which you must have been seeking a long time. It was entirely the fault of the waiter, who informed me that a lady wished to see me. We will soon meet again. I need detain you no longer now."

Dartige felt little inclined to accept this insolent dismissal, and tried to think of a reply which would, in some measure, at least, appease his wounded pride; but the position in which he found himself was so utterly false that he did not know how to get out of the scrape honorably. In fact, there seemed to be nothing left for him but to beat a retreat.

The entrance of the waiter with the oysters afforded him an opportunity to retire in silence, so bowing respectfully to the countess, and bestowing upon the count a look that said as plainly as any words, "I am at your service," he withdrew.

Clara made no attempt to detain him. Everything else was forgotten in her desire to question her husband. But the waiter was present.

Listrac speedily disposed of him, however.

"We shall not take supper," he said to him. "Charge all that has been ordered to me, and send the bill to me to-morrow morning."

Then, turning to his wife, he added:

"Come, madame."

Clara was ready to go, for she had not even removed her bonnet; but she had not foreseen this *denouement*. She accepted it, however, for this was no time for discussion.

She followed her husband down-stairs in silence; but hearing him order the chasseur to call a carriage, she ventured to remark that she already had one, whereupon the count replied with an ironical smile:

"Of course. You could not have followed me on foot."

Nothing can astonish the chasseur of a fashionable Paris restaurant. The one belonging to the Café Anglais summoned Mme. de Listrac's coachman, and a moment afterward the husband and wife were bowling swiftly along toward their residence on the Rue de Monceaux.

Neither seemed inclined to break the silence. Clara, deeply agitated, was divided between a desire to excuse her conduct, and to break forth into a torrent of reproaches. She was too deeply in love with George, to maneuver as a clever woman would have done, and yet she feared she would go too far if she assumed the offensive.

George had his own reasons for being silent, so he lighted a cigar, and they reached their destination without exchanging a single word.

Clara, disconcerted by this oppressive silence, began to think that she had accused her husband unjustly, and to wonder anxiously what she had better do. She knew that he was quite capable of resorting to extreme measures, and she said to herself, "If he should leave me I should certainly die."



"George," she said, timidly, as they were crossing the court-yard, "will you come with me? I must speak to you."

"I, too, must speak to you," he replied.

Clara's maid was still sitting up, in spite of the orders her mistress had given her before going out. She was waiting for her in the same little *salon*, where everything was ready for her reception.

As soon as the servant had divested her of her fur cloak and hat, Clara dismissed her, and again took possession of the arm chair she had occupied before starting out in search of her recreant husband.

George had already seated himself upon a sofa on the other side of the fire-place. He had removed his hat, but he still retained possession of his overcoat and cane as if to indicate that his stay would be brief; and the stern gaze he directed upon his wife was ominous in the extreme.

"First of all," he began, "let me set your mind at rest upon one point. You pretend that you did not go to the *Café Anglais* with this Monsieur Dartige. But you have known him a long time; I found him alone with you, and my self-respect makes it necessary for me to give him a lesson; consequently, I shall challenge him, and I hope to repay his insolence and presumption by a good sword-thrust."

"You surely will do nothing of the kind!" cried the countess.

"I most certainly shall. Now, may I inquire why you ventured to play the spy on me?"

"I had been waiting for you for hours—I became tired of waiting, and—"

"But how did you know that I was at the club?"

"Your friend, Monsieur de Moulieres, told me so, and advised me to go there for you."

"Moulieres!" repeated George, with very evident surprise and annoyance.

"Yes; he called here at midnight, announcing that he had been sent by you. He afterward admitted, however, that he had taken it upon himself to warn me that you were engaged in a game that was likely to prove your ruin."

"And acting upon the advice of a man you scarcely know, you went to the club?"

"Yes; and just as I arrived there, I saw you come out of the club-house and enter a coupé of which a woman was the sole occupant."

"And you concluded, from this fact, that I am unfaithful to you, I suppose?"

"How can I help thinking so? I do think so, and I shall continue to think so until you have presented irrefutable proofs to the contrary."

"So be it. I scorn to justify myself; but before broaching a much more important subject, I wish to explain my position as clearly as possible, and to tell you what occurred this evening."

"The lady you saw with me is the wife of a friend of mine; and I have frequently met her. She was to take supper with him and two or three of our acquaintances, who were to meet them at the *Café Anglais*. When she called for him at the club he had lost a great deal of money and was unwilling to leave the card-table. I



had had enough of baccarat, so he begged me to accompany the lady to the restaurant, where the other guests were awaiting them, and I could not refuse."

"You might at least have remembered that I was suffering the most intolerable anxiety," said Clara, bitterly.

"One can not think of everything," replied George, dryly.

"Allow me to finish my story, if you please.

"I had scarcely entered the room where the supper was to be served when a waiter came to inform me that a lady insisted upon seeing me. I could not imagine who the lady was; but I had no intention of remaining with my friends, so I willingly consented to go and see what was wanted. The waiter pointed out the room to me. I entered it, and, to my very great surprise, found you there in company with Monsieur Dartige.

"Will you do me the favor to explain what you were doing there? It is useless to say that your presence was due solely to chance, for Monsieur Dartige had ordered supper."

Clara had listened to this recital without any attempt at interruption; but indignation, jealousy, and doubt were all imprinted upon her face. The assurance with which her husband defended himself had not convinced her of his innocence; but she no longer felt certain of his guilt. Already their rôles had become reversed. The accused had been transformed into the judge.

She endeavored to regain the ascendancy in this contest between husband and wife, however.

"No," she exclaimed, looking searchingly at George, "this is not true. That woman was Madame de Benserade. Do not deny it. I know that what I say is the truth."

The count turned pale, but he quickly recovered himself, and replied in a perfectly calm voice:

"Was it Moulieres who gave you this valuable information as well?"

"No," replied Clara, cut to the heart, "it was the Marquise de Marvejols, your cousin. She came to see me to-day expressly to warn me. It is to her that I am indebted for the knowledge that you prefer a worthless and disreputable woman to me," she continued hotly.

George's eyes flashed ominously.

"How long is it since you began to place such implicit confidence in the gossip of this notorious old busybody?" he retorted angrily. "You are at perfect liberty to believe whatever you please, however. It is now time for me to speak to you on a much more important subject. I am about to leave France."

"With this woman?" cried the countess.

"You are evidently losing your mind. I am about to leave France for a long time, and perhaps forever, for I am ruined, irretrievably ruined."

"And you would leave me for such a reason as that!" exclaimed Clara, instantly forgetting all her former doubts and suspicions.

"It seems to me an all-sufficient reason," sneered the count.

"To-day, at the Bourse, I lost not only all I possess, but more. I shall give up everything to my creditors; but I do not feel inclined to remain in Paris, where I am likely to meet them at every turn.



I shall make the best possible arrangements with them, and then leave for Australia in the hope of retrieving my losses there.

"Only yesterday it would have cost me a bitter pang to tear myself from you; but after what has occurred this evening, I can bear the separation with resignation."

"George, George, do not speak thus," cried the countess. "You know that I have no cause to reproach myself, and that I can not live without you. What does it matter, after all, if you have lost your fortune! I am rich, and all I have belongs to you."

"No, for your fortune is settled upon yourself. The money is yours, yours alone; and I come of a race that does not accept alms. Better, a hundred times better, exile and poverty than humiliation."

"Hush! or I shall think that you do not love me, and that you have never loved me. When I married you, I did not ask you if you were rich. It was you who insisted that our marriage contract should make me absolute mistress of my own property; but I have always felt that everything was ours in common. Had I been unfortunate, and lost all my money, I should not have blushed to ask assistance from you, and I am sure that you would have shared with me all you possess."

"That is true; but the cases are entirely different."

"In what respect? You know that I gained my fortune by my talent, and that it was as honorably acquired as if I had inherited it from my father, as you did."

"Perhaps so; but I will not have it said that the Count de Lis-trac is living upon his wife's demi-semi-quavers."

"No one will say that, for no one knows anything about our private affairs, and so long as your debts are paid, no one is going to ask you where you obtained the money to pay them."

"I think I should know how to silence any one who ventured to make any inquiries upon the subject, but you talk of impossibilities. If I should consent to what you propose, I should only reduce you to poverty, without saving myself."

"How much do you owe?" asked the countess, eagerly.

"I would not tell you but for the necessity of convincing you of the truth of my situation," replied George, after a short silence. "The situation may be briefly stated as follows: When I first embarked in these business speculations, which have resulted so disastrously, I had about six hundred thousand francs left of my patrimony. I shall relinquish all that is left of this amount to my creditors, but to meet all my obligations, I should require at least four hundred and fifty thousand francs more."

"And you would leave me for such a trifle as that! You forget that I have a million of my own, and this house alone is worth five hundred thousand francs. I will sell it, and our horses and carriages as well, and we shall still have enough left to live upon."

"At your expense," murmured the count, shaking his head sadly.

"What!" exclaimed Clara, "you still hesitate to sacrifice your pride for my sake? You would rather see me die of despair at losing you?"

George looked up at his wife, who thought she could read in his face that she had touched him at last. All his sternness had certainly vanished, and his drawn features had relaxed.



"Then you no longer believe that I have transferred my affections to the Baroness de Benserade?" he asked, half-smilingly.

"No more than you believe that I care anything whatever for Monsieur Dartige," responded Clara, vehemently.

"Oh, you are going too fast, my dear. The charge against me is groundless, while you have yet to prove to me that this gentleman with whom you were about to sup—by the merest chance—and in all honor—"

"Had it been otherwise, I certainly should not have bade the waiter tell you that I wished to see you. I should have concealed myself, instead of sending for you."

This time the count smiled openly.

"That is a telling argument," he replied. "Why didn't you think of it in the first place?"

"Because I did not think of defending myself."

"No; you thought only of accusing me. Then, according to you, all this is only a slight misunderstanding."

"I think you must feel thoroughly convinced of it. Shall we not sign a treaty of peace?"

The count took his wife's proffered hand and pressed a kiss upon it.

"Ah! you are yourself again, my dearest!" she exclaimed, with an emotion M. de Listrac did not fully share.

He seemed to have forgotten his grievance against his wife; but he remained complete master of himself, while Clara forgot everything else in her regained happiness.

"Ah, well," she continued, "I confess that I have done very wrong. I should have closed my ears against Madame de Marjevol's slander, and shown Monsieur de Moulieres to the door. But I lost my senses entirely. It is not my fault that I am so terribly jealous. I love you so much! But you can forgive me for that, can you not?"

Now it was she who was asking forgiveness. Love is indeed blind.

"And I hope that you will not challenge Monsieur Dartige," she was imprudent enough to add.

"You seem to be very deeply interested in that gentleman," said the count, frowning slightly.

"He is indifferent to me, but I do not want you to risk your life. Besides, a hostile meeting would be absurd under the circumstances. Think no more about him. We shall never see him again. I had almost forgotten him, and now I almost hate him since he has been the cause—though the innocent cause—of arousing your anger against me. But you are mine once more, and I shall keep you."

"No; for I must soon leave you."

"Leave me? We are to be separated merely because you have been unfortunate in business? If we were penniless, I would follow you to Australia. But in a few days all your debts will be paid. To-morrow I will see my lawyer, and I am sure that we shall have no trouble in disposing of the house. My lawyer told me only last week that he knew a person who would be glad to purchase it. I shall not tell him why I part with it. I shall merely announce that we are going to leave Paris for Italy, Switzerland, or wherever you like."



"What a child you are! By to-morrow everybody will know that I have nothing, and that you have impoverished yourself to pay my debts. Every one will point the finger of scorn at me, my dearest, and I would rather die in want and exile than reduce you to poverty."

"Poverty! I was no stranger to that in my early life, and I swear to you that, borne with you; it has no terrors for me. But we shall not be reduced to poverty, on the contrary, we shall still have a modest fortune of four or five hundred thousand francs. If that does not content you, I can return to the operatic stage. My voice is unimpaired, and I have only to say the word to secure an engagement that would treble our income."

"I do not doubt it. The name of the Countess de Listrac would look well upon a play-bill."

"You know very well that I should appear under that of Clara Monti."

"Which amounts to exactly the same thing. Every one knows that I married Clara Monti, and you will never return to the stage with my consent."

"You are right. We will say no more about that, but be content with the modest competence left us. Honor is worth far more than money—honor, and the happiness of living for each other. I shall be glad to give up society, and I will try to make you forget the world. You wish to leave Paris. Let us depart together."

"You forget that this departure would strongly resemble a flight."

"Not if your debts are paid before we leave."

"But I am not sure that my fortune and the proceeds of the sale of this house will suffice."

"Then you have not told me all!"

"To-night, at the club, I bet heavily, hoping to retrieve to some extent, at least, my losses at the Bourse, and—"

"And you lost? How much?"

"About thirty thousand francs. A trifle, in comparison with my losses elsewhere. It is true, however, that these debts of honor must be paid within twenty-four hours, while I have until the end of the month to settle my other indebtedness."

"That does not matter," replied Clara, quickly. "If you need this money to-morrow, you can obtain it from my banker. All my ready money is deposited with him, and I will give you a check for the amount you name. He will think you are drawing it for me."

The count did not reply, save by a gesture that said plainly: "To what depths of humiliation am I reduced!" Then, covering his face with his hands, he bowed his head upon the arm of the sofa on which he was sitting. By the convulsive movements of his shoulders one would have supposed that he was sobbing violently.

Clara could restrain herself no longer. The sight of this silent anguish deprived her of the last lingering vestige of reason and discernment. It never once occurred to her that she might be witnessing a scene carefully prepared in advance. George was unfortunate; he was suffering; she forgot everything else, and, falling on her knees before him, she twined her arms about his neck, drew him to her, and covered his face with kisses.

"George, I love you," she murmured fondly. "I love you a



hundred times more than ever! What does all the rest matter? Tell me that you will never leave me! Say that you will accept what I offer you!"

He resisted feebly, then, releasing himself from her embrace, he said, in hollow tones:

"You will have it so! You insist that I shall sacrifice my scruples, brave the scorn of the world, and give up my friends, for the Count de Listrac, dependent upon his wife, will be deemed unworthy of notice."

"You will be my husband, my lover," whispered Clara, caressing him fondly.

"Ah, well, so be it! I will live for you alone. Your love will console me for everything. It will give me courage to despise the fools who sneer at me, and I think I shall know how to silence them."

George and his wife were now completely reconciled. Lifting Clara, whose arms were still about his neck, he pressed her to his heart so passionately that she nearly swooned with happiness. Overcome with rapture, she sat there a long time, silent and motionless, with her head resting upon the breast of her husband, who soothed her with tenderest words.

The lips of this husband said: "I adore you;" but his eyes said: "At last!" and his countenance expressed satisfaction, rather than emotion, the lively satisfaction aroused by a consciousness of having conducted a delicate negotiation to a successful termination—the satisfaction of an actor who has just played a difficult rôle with consummate skill.

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## CHAPTER II.

ON the day following this reconciliation, there were no matters of a sentimental nature under discussion at the residence of the lady who had been the cause of the first quarrel between a once fondly united couple.

The Baroness de Benserade occupied spacious apartments on the first floor of a handsome house on the Rue de Suresnes. There she received her friends, and she had many of them, every day, and often gave very delightful evening entertainments, artistic *fêtes*, where one was sure to be treated to very excellent music, and original poems and essays of no mean order.

This Baroness de Benserade was the child of poor but ambitious parents who had given her, instead of a dowry, very excellent advice, and a practical education. From her earliest infancy, she had been carefully instructed in the art of pleasing, with a view to securing the most eligible possible *parti*, and she had profited by these lessons. Intelligent, shrewd, unscrupulous, and full of tact, Juliette Plantin was, at the age of twenty, a thorough skeptic in petticoats, with an intense thirst for luxury and strong passions which she had already learned to conceal. The long looked for suitor had presented himself in the guise of a worthy country nobleman, already past the prime of life, and Juliette had not neglected the opportunity.

After several years devoted to the study of her liege lord, she con-



cluded to enliven her rather monotonous existence—the baron spent nine months out of the twelve on his estate in Normandy—by a little flirtation. The result was a duel in which both combatants were slain, and the baroness, on her twenty-fifth birthday, found herself not only rich but free.

Even now, at the age of thirty, she was still very beautiful, though her loveliness was of the eighteenth, rather than of the nineteenth, century type. She was another Du Barry, plump, fresh and rosy, with a rather languishing expression that softened the brilliancy of her sparkling eyes, and of the golden hair which might have served her as a mantle, like that of Genevieve de Brabant.

Her beauty was the exact opposite of that of Clara Monti, who had the regular features and regal form of a Greek statue, and the serious mouth and sad eyes peculiar to Italians.

Men like contrasts.

The baroness had risen at an unusually early hour, and was just breakfasting, dressed ready to go out, when her maid ushered M. de Moulieres into the room.

It was quite evident that this gentleman was on very intimate terms with the mistress of the establishment, for the conversation that ensued was preceded by no exchange of polite commonplaces.

“So here you are,” remarked the baroness, rather curtly. “I am glad of it, I have something to tell you.”

“What has happened, my dear friend?” inquired Moulieres, tranquilly, placing his hat carefully upon a console.

“I narrowly escaped finding myself face to face with George’s wife last night at the Café Anglais. You see I had asked him to take me there to supper, just for the fun of the thing, you know, and I called for him at the club on my return from Madame d’Artignan’s reception. The countess must have been watching her husband for she followed us into the restaurant, and we were scarcely installed in a certain green room with which you are familiar, when she attempted to enter it. The waiter had all he could do to prevent her from doing so, but he finally succeeded in getting her into a private room, and then came and told George, who guessed at once that it was the countess.”

“How did he get out of the scrape?”

“In a way that was anything but satisfactory to me. I hoped he would take advantage of the opportunity to rid himself of this *civdevant prima donna* forever, but instead of doing that, he left me to go and pacify her. Men are such cowards.”

“He did exactly right,” replied Moulieres.

“So you are inclined to undertake his defense! You have gone over to the enemy, you, from whom I have no secrets.”

“Listrac is certainly an enemy of whom you have no cause to complain. At what amount do you value the services he has rendered you during your six months acquaintance?”

“I have set no valuation upon them, and that is not the question. I love George de Listrac, as you know, and I am not in the habit of yielding precedence to any one. I am deeply incensed at the trick he played upon me, and I am by no means sure that I shall forgive him.”

“You make a great mistake in getting angry about such a trifle.



George has special reasons for being anxious to avoid any open rupture with his wife at present. But what was the conclusion of the adventure?"

"He left with his countess, and I, after waiting for him twenty minutes, or more, ordered my carriage, and returned home in a furious rage. I assure you, George shall pay dearly for this affront. But what could have put it into Madame de Listrac's head to go to the Café Anglais last night in search of her husband? Some one must have given her a hint. If I knew the person who ventured to do it—"

"Madame de Listrac did not go straight to the restaurant. She must have seen the count enter your carriage at the club-house, where she had gone in pursuit of him. It was I who sent her there."

"You! Well, this is really too much. You have certainly entered the field against me?"

"I am more truly your friend than ever, and it was in your interest that I acted, you may rest assured of that."

"You must be jesting."

"Not at all. I had left Listrac at the card-table, betting heavily. My regard for you made me desire to save him from utter ruin, if possible, and I could think of no other way than to warn his wife. Had I known that you were going to call for him at the club-house, I should have refrained from doing so, but all things considered, I don't regret what I have done."

"So to prevent George from losing a few bank-notes, you exposed me to a risk of finding myself face to face with his wife," said the baroness sullenly. "I am greatly obliged to you, and to her also."

There was a moment's silence during which M. de Moulières sat with his eyes riveted upon the angry face of the baroness.

"Are you acquainted with George's financial condition?" he at last inquired, suddenly.

"I know that he is very rich."

"One is never rich when one gambles—at the Bourse, especially."

"He cleared nearly a million last year."

"Has he said anything to you about his recent losses?"

"He told me that he had just lost fifteen hundred louis at the club. It did not seem to affect his spirits in the least, however."

"He will find it a much more difficult matter to console himself for his recent losses in stocks. He must owe twelve hundred thousand francs."

"Oh, well, he will pay it," replied the baroness with unruffled composure.

"And how, if I may venture to inquire? His entire property would not suffice to meet his obligations, and he can not touch that of his wife, who took good care to have her fortune settled on herself when she married him."

"That was like her, the old miser!" growled Mme. de Benserade. "If I could see her reduced to poverty it would almost console me for George's misfortunes."

"You will never have that satisfaction, unless she should impoverish herself of her own accord to pay her husband's debts."

"She will take good care not to do that. She has no heart."

"Ah, ha, who knows? But, however that may be, you must



admit it is a very fortunate thing that Listrac did not break with his wife. If he can get safely out of this scrape, he will be able to retrieve his losses, for if he can manage to pay all his creditors at a time like this, he will be able to obtain unlimited credit in future. Do you think he will be here to-day?"

"If he doesn't, I will never see him again while I live."

"If he does call try to discover the condition of his business affairs. If he can obtain his wife's indorsement I can safely promise to obtain for him at once, all the money he needs. Menager will loan him almost any amount upon my recommendation."

"At twenty per cent., I suppose?"

"What does that matter, if it be the countess who pays the interest?"

"Yes, let her pay it. Let her sell her diamonds and her fine house, and go and give singing lessons where she came from. I will purchase her house, and live there one of these days with George as my husband."

"That would be charming!" sneered Moulieres, "but you forget that this lady is his lawful wife."

"You forget that there is little or no difficulty about obtaining divorces in these days."

"But what would you gain by such a marriage?"

"I should become a countess."

"But you are already a baroness; besides, your first marriage turned out badly."

"Not so badly for me."

"What is your present fortune?"

"I have a yearly income of sixty thousand francs. It was only twenty thousand when I became a widow. But why do you ask that question?"

"Merely to remind you that Listrac is a ruined man."

"But you just told me that he might succeed in weathering the storm."

"Yes, for the time being, if his wife comes to his aid. But a man who speculates once is sure to speculate again, and if you are ever foolish enough to marry him, he will ruin you in your turn."

"I should not allow him to do that. I am no Clara Monti. Listrac suits me, and I intend to marry him some day, but I sha'n't let him squander my money."

"Let me give you a word of advice, my dear Juliette," said Moulieres earnestly. "Sedulously refrain from doing anything to widen the breach between George and his wife, at least for the present. Let him effect a reconciliation with her if possible. I have an idea that he will succeed. You will profit by the reconciliation, for he will never forgive the countess for having saved him. I know him. He will never forgive her for the humiliation he will be compelled to endure. It is my interest in you, my dear Juliette, that prompts me to give you this advice. Listrac is entirely indifferent to me, but I must admit that I hate his wife, and if you will be guided by me I promise that you shall have the satisfaction of seeing her ruined, deserted and broken-hearted."

"Nothing would please me better."

"Very well, but no foolishness! Don't spoil my plans by pro-



claiming your love for Listrac on the housetop, or by making any scenes with him about his wife. And when he calls, pretend to be ignorant of his financial misfortunes."

At that very moment the door opened, and the maid announced:

"The Count de Listrac."

"Good-morning, count," said the baroness, gayly, evidently resolved to profit by the instructions of her usual adviser. "You have probably called to find out what became of me after your abrupt departure. I am sure it is very kind in you. Ah, well, I ate my supper alone, strange as it may appear, and then sadly returned home—to dream of you," she added with an arch glance, and merry laugh. "No apologies are necessary, I assure you."

"You are an angel," replied Listrac, kissing her hand. "I have been guilty of an unpardonable offense, and yet you forgive me."

"I can not say that I feel so charitably disposed toward the cause of all this unpleasantness," he added, looking Moulières full in the face.

"You should not be angry with me, my dear fellow," replied the delinquent, carelessly. "I was actuated by the best possible motives, and sinned only through ignorance, for had I known—"

"We will discuss this matter elsewhere," said the count, quickly.

"Whenever and wherever you please."

"As soon as we leave here, if it suits your convenience. I was in search of you, and I can enjoy Madame de Benserade's society only for a moment."

"Ah! this time it is my turn to be angry," cried Juliette. "I hoped to keep you all the morning to compensate for my last evening's disappointment, and you rush off without even sitting down. I should not be afraid to wager almost any amount that you are on your way to the Bourse. I think it very unkind in you to desert me in order to run after a lot of sharpers. If you lose your money I shall not be inconsolable, by any means, for you may then favor your friends with a little more of your society."

The baroness had entered thoroughly into the spirit of her rôle, and Moulières rewarded her with an approving glance.

Listrac was equally well content. He feared that Juliette had heard of his losses, and now that Clara had promised to save him he was anxious to conceal the real situation of affairs from the baroness.

"You need have no fears, my dear madame," he answered gayly. "I shall not speculate any more. I have had an all-sufficient lesson."

"What! are you really embarrassed? If you are, all that I possess is at your disposal, as you know very well, my dear friend."

"I know. You are, indeed, an angel," said the count. "But, fortunately, I am in no serious trouble, and even if I were I could not take advantage of your kindness."

Listrac was perfectly sincere in this declaration, for though he did not feel the slightest scruples about impoverishing his wife he would have blushed to accept such a service from his new divinity.

"And now," he added, gently, "you must not only permit me to say good-by to you, but also to take our friend away with me."

"I consent on condition that you will call and see me this even-



ing. If you break your word I assure you that I shall be very angry with you."

"I will certainly be here. Come, Moulières."

That gentleman required no urging, for he felt a presentiment that his conversation with Listrac was going to be a very interesting one.

They had scarcely reached the street when the count began by saying:

"My dear fellow, I am not in the least angry with you for having warned my wife. Of course you could not know of my engagement with the baroness, and I was engaged in a game that threatened to end most disastrously for me. Besides, all's well that ends well, and the meeting at the Café Anglais brought about between my wife and myself an explanation which I have long desired. She understands now that I have no idea of surrendering my liberty, and she will henceforth allow me to be undisputed master of my own actions."

"I congratulate you, my friend. Life would be intolerable to a married man if he were compelled to submit to his wife's constant persecution. But I thought Madame de Listrac was very jealous."

"You are very much mistaken, but even if she were I am not inclined to submit to any unseemly interference. If she gave me any trouble of that kind I should not hesitate to leave her, and I know to whom I should look for consolation, for Madame de Ben-serade is adorable."

"She is certainly devoted to you. Only a few moments ago she was plying me with questions, so great is her anxiety to learn if you have been a sufferer by the crash."

"And you told her nothing. I am greatly obliged to you for it. The truth is, my dear fellow, I have lost heavily, like many others, and find myself greatly embarrassed, though only for the time being, for very fortunately I shall soon have the means of meeting all my obligations. I have lost just eleven hundred and fifty thousand francs. But I have six hundred thousand francs on deposit at my bankers', and before the end of the month I shall be in a position to pay my entire indebtedness. It will take all I have to do this of course, and I shall be sadly in need of some ready money—say one hundred thousand francs—to meet my current expenses, and to save me from being compelled to make any change in my mode of living before I can make another start. Can you procure this money for me?"

"I should be only too glad to loan you all you want, but I, too, have lost heavily," Moulières answered, hurriedly.

"Oh, the idea of having recourse to your purse never occurred to me," replied Listrac. "But I thought you might know some money-lender who would accommodate me."

"I know but one, a man named Menager, who has accommodated many members of our club. I have applied to him two or three times, and he has treated me very fairly."

"Do you think he would loan me the amount of which I stand in need?"

"Why not? He always seems to have plenty of money at his disposal."



"But I must have the money to-day, and your man may want time to make inquiries about my solvency. He, of course, knows nothing about me?"

"You are very much mistaken, my dear fellow. Menager is a specialist. He knows the financial condition of every person of any importance in Paris, and he is always ready to oblige them, though he will loan money only on the best security. His rates are rather high, it is true, but—"

"Oh, I expect that, of course, and don't mind paying a few hundred francs more or less. Will you introduce me to this capitalist?"

"Immediately, if you wish. He lives on the Rue Godot de Mauroy, not far from here. Shall we pay him a call as we pass?"

"Yes, if you think there is any probability that he will consider my application favorably."

"I have no doubt of it. You probably figure upon his list of possible patrons."

"But he may hesitate after my losses of yesterday."

"Why should he, when you are still solvent? You have lost only a little more than you made last year, and when you have paid what you owe you will still be the Count de Listrac, a nobleman of stainless reputation, and the possessor of a very handsome fortune."

"A fortune of nearly half a million," said Listrac, with unblushing effrontery.

"Liar!" thought Moulieres, who was as well informed upon this point as upon many others.

But he continued aloud:

"That is a very comfortable fortune, and I suppose you do not include Madame de Listrac's private property in this estimate?"

"No, my wife has a million of her own, and will soon have more, for she intends to sell the house we are living in, and that is now worth more than half as much again as she paid for it."

"That is also her own private property, I believe?"

"Yes, according to the terms of our marriage contract, though we really share alike in the entire property and always shall."

"Even after the scene at the Café Anglais?"

"Yes, even after the scene at the Café Anglais. My wife is perfection. Several persons have tried to make trouble between us, but all such efforts have proved unsuccessful."

This conversation had brought the two friends to the entrance of the Rue Godot. Listrac was in the best of spirits. Everything promised well. Clara had consented to save him by paying his debts, and the obliging Moulieres was about to furnish him with the means of tempting fortune anew at the baccarat table, if not at the Bourse.

But M. de Moulieres was even better satisfied than Listrac, for everything seemed to indicate the speedy success of his complicated schemes—schemes which no one had divined, not even the baroness, though he expected her to contribute largely to their ultimate success.

The house in which M. Menager resided was eminently respectable in appearance, and he occupied a handsome suite of apartments on the first floor.

A neatly attired maid-servant opened the door for the visitors,



and ushered them into a comfortably furnished apartment which evidently served as a waiting-room for visitors when M. Menager was engaged, which seemed to be the case at the present time.

The maid took the card upon which M. de Moulières had penciled a few lines, left the room with it, and returned a few minutes afterward to inform the gentlemen that her master would see them at once.

They were conducted to a luxuriously furnished office with which any prominent lawyer would have been well content. There was a rich Turkish carpet upon the floor, costly pictures adorned the walls, the *étagères* were loaded with rare *bric-à-brac*, and at the further end of the room was an immense safe.

The desk was placed directly in front of the window in such a way that M. Menager sat with his back to the light, and, thanks to this arrangement, which reminded one of that of the cabinet of a judge of instruction, the usurer could see the effect produced upon would-be borrowers by his wily refusals or evasive promises. The countenance of the applicant became a thermometer that indicated the intensity of his need.

On this occasion, however, M. Menager scorned to make use of this advantage, but advancing to meet his visitors bowed to them courteously, and politely invited them to be seated.

He was a middle-aged man, with a pleasant face and very genial manners, and there was nothing either in his appearance or attire that betokened the unscrupulous money-lender, for he was handsomely and even fashionably dressed.

Moulières broke the ice by introducing the Count de Listrac.

"My dear Menager," he began, "my friend here wishes a loan of one hundred thousand francs to-day, so I have brought him to you. I can vouch for him as for myself, and you know that your business transactions with me have always proved alike profitable and satisfactory."

"I have the honor of knowing the Count de Listrac by sight and by reputation," replied the usurer bowing, "and only day before yesterday I would not have hesitated to comply with his request without any other security than his note. Permit me to add that the circumstances are now very different. Monsieur invested heavily in the Union Générale, and after the crash of yesterday--"

"I see that you are well posted," interrupted Listrac; "I have lost heavily, but my margins are covered by the amount on deposit at my bankers'. You can satisfy yourself of this fact, if you like."

"I do not doubt it, sir; but though I should be very glad to oblige you I can not depart from my usual rules. Excuse my frankness, and let us try to devise some means of reconciling your desire with my safety."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Moulières, "you are certainly hard to please to-day. Monsieur de Listrac's signature is good for almost any amount. Though I am not rich by any means I offered to lend my friend the money he wants. He refused out of excess of delicacy, preferring to pay a heavy interest for the money than to inconvenience me. Take advantage of the opportunity, my dear fellow. It will not present itself again, for Monsieur de Listrac will soon be relieved of his temporary embarrassment, and will never



have any further need of you. What do you need to decide you? Will my indorsement suffice?"

M. Menager seemed greatly embarrassed. He probably feared to offend a good customer by declining his indorsement, and it was with some timidity that he finally ventured to ask:

"The property of the Countess de Listrac is settled upon herself, I believe?"

The count started. He had no idea that this usurer was so well informed.

"Yes, sir," said he, "but my wife's fortune has nothing to do with the matter. My own is the thing to be considered."

"Certainly, but that of the countess is intact. She can dispose of it to suit herself, and there is nothing to prevent her from accommodating her husband. She might do so, for instance, without making any change in the investment of her money merely by indorsing a note drawn by you."

Listrac bit his lips, but made no reply.

"That is not a bad idea," remarked Moulieres.

"But an entirely impracticable one," growled the count. "My wife would not object, I am sure; but she understands nothing about business, and it might alarm her to have a note drawn by me presented to her for indorsement."

"But what is there to prevent you from taking the note to her yourself, and fully explaining the facts. If she is at home it will take you only about three quarters of an hour to go there and return."

As he spoke, Moulieres looked searchingly at the usurer, who had as yet neither approved nor opposed this suggestion, but who seemed to hesitate; and Moulieres doubtless exercised some potent influence over him, for the money-lender finally replied, though not without some reluctance:

"Yes, the matter might be arranged in that way, though it is scarcely in accordance with commercial customs. The note should be presented for acceptance by a third party. This is a precaution which is generally necessary to insure the authenticity of the indorser's signature."

"We know that, of course, but you surely can not doubt Monsieur de Listrac's integrity."

"Certainly not," replied M. Menager, though not very earnestly.

"Then, in an urgent case like this, you can certainly neglect a mere formality. Draw up the necessary documents, and the whole matter can be satisfactorily concluded in less than an hour."

The count had not uttered a word, but though he thus allowed Moulieres to arrange the matter to his liking, his face betrayed his feelings. He was evidently troubled by the thought of asking another sacrifice of his wife, and yet he did not refuse.

"We had better draw three notes, for thirty-five thousand francs each, payable in ninety days," said Menager, urged on by an almost imperious glance from Moulieres. "That will make a total of one hundred and five thousand francs; one hundred thousand for the count, and five thousand for interest, which is certainly not too much. Here are the blanks," he added, opening his desk.

Listrac hesitated a moment, but finally took them.



"I knew he would come to it," thought Moulieres, his eyes flashing with triumph.

"If the count should desire the loan for six months he can have it for ten thousand francs," remarked Menager.

"No, three months will be long enough," replied Listrac.

"And now that this is satisfactorily arranged, I should advise you to jump into a carriage, and drive to the Rue de Monceau immediately," suggested Moulieres. "You can be back here in an hour if you find Madame de Listrac still at home. If you like, I will wait for you here?"

When Menager returned to his office after accompanying the count to the door, he found Moulieres rubbing his hands complacently.

"Well, my dear fellow," he inquired, point-blank, "will you have the kindness to tell me why you are so anxious to entail a loss of one hundred thousand francs upon us?"

"We shall not lose it, my friend," replied Moulieres, tranquilly.

"But you know as well as I do that the man is ruined. He pretends that he has enough money left to pay his indebtedness, but he lies. Last evening his broker mentioned this Listrac as one of the clients who would be utterly unable to make his margins good. I told you so this morning when you came to talk with me about him, and yet only two hours afterward you bring here and send in a card upon which you have written: 'Loan him what he wants, provided his wife will indorse his note.' I never heard of such folly. By the terms of our contract, you are to have the management of the business, I admit; but for all that I am your partner, and am obliged to bear my share of the losses."

"Yes, exactly as you are entitled to your share of the profits. Well, I will assume all the responsibility in this case. Listrac is ruined, it is true; but Madame de Listrac is not."

"I know that, but she is not compelled to pay the debts of the spendthrift she was foolish enough to marry."

"And whom she idolizes. What would you think if I should tell you that she is going to sell her house in order to be able to relieve her husband of his financial difficulties?"

"How much will she have left after doing this?"

"Five or six hundred thousand francs, at the very least, so you see that we are perfectly safe. I have foreseen all this for a long time, and have been making my plans accordingly."

"Your plans may be superb ones, but that which strikes me most forcibly just now is that we are not likely to ever see our money again."

"You are very much mistaken. Listrac will be back in less than an hour with his wife's indorsement."

"She must be a fool to give it to him."

"She is very much in love, which amounts to the same thing. Besides, if she does not indorse it you need not let him have the money, so you see we risk nothing."

"But what guarantee have we that the signature is genuine, even if he returns with it. He may forge it."

"That would certainly be a strange, not to say dangerous, proceeding for a nobleman; still there have been such cases."



"So you admit that. Then why have you, who are such a thorough business man, compelled me to rely upon the very doubtful probity of this gentleman."

"What does it matter to you whether he is honest or not provided we get our money back?"

"But that is the very question. You yourself admit that there is nothing to prevent him from forging his wife's name."

"We can easily discover whether he has been guilty of such an act by showing the notes to Madame de Listrac."

"But what if she should declare that the indorsement is indeed a forgery?"

"Then you must declare your intention of prosecuting her husband for swindling and forgery."

"That would not help us any."

"Do you suppose that this woman, who would go through fire and water for him, would allow you to make a formal complaint against him?"

"She will tire of being his dupe after awhile."

"Never, my friend. The worse he treats her the more she will do for him. She is about to sell her house to save him from humiliation, and she would sell herself rather than see him go to prison. A woman's heart does not change in a day; still something might happen to open Madame de Listrac's eyes to her husband's real character, so I have no intention of waiting for the notes to become due before showing them to her. On the contrary, I shall only wait for a favorable opportunity, and as soon as that presents itself you will take the notes to Madame de Listrac. If the indorsement is a forgery she will pay them immediately, I am satisfied, for she will wish to destroy all proofs of her husband's villainy."

"Between you and me that would be the best thing that could possibly happen for us, for we should recover five thousand francs as interest for a week's loan, which would certainly be a very handsome profit."

Menager was beginning to understand, and his face brightened. He did not try to guess Moulieres' motive in setting this trap for Listrac, but he realized that his partner was much shrewder than himself, and deemed it advisable not to interfere with his plans.

"There is a ring at the door!" said Moulieres, suddenly. "He has certainly lost no time in going to the Rue de Monceau and returning. Now conclude the transaction as quickly as possible. Just glance at the signatures and then open your safe without making any objection or asking any questions."

The door of the office opened and George de Listrac entered. He was a trifle pale, but he said composedly:

"You see, gentlemen, that I have not kept you waiting long. I was fortunate enough to find my wife at home, so the affair was only a matter of a moment. Here are the notes duly indorsed."

Menager glanced at them, then turned and took a large package of bank-notes from his safe. The transaction was now speedily concluded, for the count did not take the trouble to count the money. He placed the notes in his wallet with very evident satisfaction, and after a brief compliment to M. Menager on his expedi-



tious manner of transacting business, he turned to Moulieres and said:

"Shall we go now, my friend?"

Moulieres eagerly assented.

"Well, how do you like my banker?" he inquired, as they descended the steps.

"I am enchanted with him. I can not thank you enough for your assistance in this matter. But for you I should have been obliged to run about the streets after this money, and as it is I have had no difficulty whatever. My wife's conduct was perfect."

"I am not surprised to hear that. I only feared that your wife would offer to loan you the money, and my friend Menager thus miss a very profitable transaction."

Listrac colored slightly, but he soon recovered himself, and replied with suspicious alacrity:

"She did offer me the money, but I declined it, for I did not want her to change any of her investments. So I explained to her that it was better, in a case like this, to apply to a usurer. In three months' time I shall have recovered from my losses, and shall be able to repay this loan without the slightest inconvenience. I should be greatly obliged to you, however, if you would say nothing to Madame de Benserade about the matter. It is one of my principles never to say anything to a woman about one's financial difficulties, especially when they are only temporary."

"You are very wise, I think, and you can rely upon my discretion, both on the Rue Suresnes and elsewhere. Shall I find you at the club this evening?"

"Do you think there will be any heavy playing there before dinner?"

"I am positive there will. A Russian prince was admitted yesterday, and he proposes to keep the bank to-night, I believe."

"In that case I shall not fail to be there. *Au revoir*," concluded Listrac, shaking his friend's hand cordially.

Moulieres watched him as he moved away.

"I have you now," he muttered. "You will come to grief, and Clara will die of a broken heart, but you shall not marry the baroness."

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### CHAPTER III.

WHILE the count was thus sinking deeper and deeper into the mire, the countess, happy in the thought of being able to save him, was making such arrangements as would insure the speedy sale of her magnificent home.

This must be disposed of without delay in order that George might be able to meet his obligations within the next twelve days, for it was now the 20th of January, and his account with his broker must be settled on or before the second day of the ensuing month.

She was, therefore, firmly resolved to effect this sale, though it was by far the most painful of all the sacrifices necessitated by her husband's reverses.

Clara Monti had purchased the beautiful house on the Rue de Monceau about two months before her marriage, and paid for it out of



the handsome private fortune gained by her voice. It was a new house that had never been occupied, and Clara had found no little enjoyment in furnishing it to suit her refined taste. During the five years she had resided in it she had devoted much thought and money to its embellishment, and it was now cited as a model of comfort and taste, and was worth much more than she had paid for it.

Nevertheless, it might not be an easy task to find an immediate cash purchaser. One can not dispose of a furnished house as one disposes of a dress of which one has tired; nor can such a transaction be as summarily concluded as a bargain with a dealer in second-hand clothing. The services of a notary are required, a deed, and many tedious formalities.

The countess knew all this by experience, but, for all that, she entertained strong hopes that there might be a way to avoid these difficulties.

Her reconciliation with George was complete. His repentance had touched her, and his protestations had reassured her. She no longer doubted his love, or the stability of his good resolutions; and she almost blessed the incident which had brought about an explanation between them.

Her notary resided on the Rue Mont Thabor, and thither she repaired about two o'clock, after a *tête-à-tête* breakfast with her husband, who had been prodigal in his lover-like attentions, but who had left her immediately after the repast, ostensibly to inform his broker that his account would be satisfactorily adjusted on the usual day.

M. Jouin, the notary, of whom she proposed to make at least a partial confidant, was an old friend, and devoted to her. He had admired and applauded her often in years gone by; and, after she renounced the stage to become a countess, he esteemed it an honor to act as her legal adviser, and regretted that she did not oftener require his services.

Mme. de Listrac reached his house almost at the very moment that George entered the usurer's house on the Rue Godot, and was immediately ushered into his presence.

M. Jouin, surprised and delighted to see her, lavished attentions and offers of service upon her; but as soon as she broached the object of her visit, he began to protest vehemently. He declared that the time was most unfavorable, that the furniture if sold at auction would not bring one third of its value; that the house itself would be worth one hundred thousand francs more in a year, and that it would be folly to place it on the market during a financial panic that was unsettling values, and alarming the wealthiest in the land.

"It is a positive necessity that causes me to part with it," said the countess, in response to these very sensible objections.

"Good Heaven! can it be that you, too, were ruined by the crash?"

"No; but my husband has lost heavily; no more, however, than he is able to repay out of his own private fortune; but we shall be obliged to reduce our expenses, and I do not feel able to keep up such a costly establishment."

"Will you allow me to remind you, madame, that, by the provis-



ions of your marriage-contract, you are not responsible for Monsieur de Listrac's debts. Your property is your own, and Monsieur de Listrac has not the slightest claim upon it."

"But I can dispose of it as I like."

"Certainly. You can even dispose of your property without your husband's consent. But it is my duty to call your attention to the fact that your fortune will be less safe when you have disposed of the only real estate you own. Monsieur de Listrac has expensive tastes, and speculates a good deal, I am told. He can neither sell nor mortgage your house, but he will be almost certain to borrow money of you if you have any at your disposal."

"My husband has nothing to do with this matter," interrupted the countess, ever ready to defend George. "It is I who need the money, and I have decided to sell my house. I apply to you because you told me quite recently that one of your clients wished to purchase it."

"That is true. Some one did offer me five hundred and forty thousand francs for your house, and even intimated a willingness to give as high as six hundred thousand. I very naturally replied that you had no idea of selling it."

"But you know who this person is? You have his address?"

"Yes, madame, but I suppose he is only acting for some other party—a lady, I believe—a wealthy foreigner who has recently come to Paris to live and who must be very anxious to establish herself in desirable quarters without delay; for her agent declared that she was willing to pay cash, on condition that she might take possession of the house immediately after the signing of the deed."

"Very well; that is exactly what I desire; and I beg that you will communicate with your client at once. If the purchaser will pay cash for the property, I will accept the amount offered."

"I am almost certain that I can obtain more. So you have fully decided, madame?"

"Fully. I am anxious to conclude the sale as soon as possible, and I trust you will do everything in your power to expedite matters."

"I shall comply with your instructions, of course, madame; though you must allow me to again express my regret at the bad news you have just told me. I had heard that Monsieur de Listrac was speculating heavily, but I was not aware that his ventures in the stock market had terminated so disastrously."

"I thank you, monsieur; but it would annoy me greatly if people should exaggerate my husband's losses; so pray say to any one who may speak to you on the subject that I sell my house entirely of my own accord."

"I shall not forget that discretion is a notary's first duty, madame," was the reassuring reply; "and I hope to have the honor of writing you to-morrow or next day, that everything has been arranged to your satisfaction."

Mme. de Listrac went away, well satisfied with M. Jouin. She had expected objections, and he had made them, though only for form's sake. He had endeavored to give her advice, but she had cut him short; and she departed assured of his zealous co-operation.



The purchaser was found, for there was nothing to lead any one to suppose that he had changed his mind.

The die was cast; the sacrifice virtually made. In two days, George would hear that the house was sold, and his debts paid. With what joy she would apprise him of the speedy conclusion of a negotiation which might have dragged for months. And how opportune was this success, coming as it did, while George was still under the softening influence of their recent reconciliation. It would, of course, be a sore trial for him to renounce the luxurious life he had heretofore led in Paris; but he must be an ingrate indeed, not to repay Clara's devotion by an ardent tenderness and an answering fidelity.

She would not see him again that day until dinner-time; so she was in no haste to return home, and decided that she would pay a visit to the dowager, who had so recently troubled her peace of mind by reports that the countess now regarded as the basest slanders.

The Marquise de Marjevols resided on the Rue de l'Université, near the Rue de Solferino, so Clara, on leaving the office of her notary, had only to cross the garden of the Tuileries, and the bridge, to reach her relative.

Although it was midwinter, the sky was clear, and the air mild—one of those exceptional days that bring the most phlegmatic Parisians from their fire-sides. A long line of carriages was moving down to the Rue de Rivoli, on the way to the Bois; the Terrasse des Feuillants was crowded with promenaders, and many children were playing in the broad path it shelters. One might have believed it spring-time. The orange flowers only were wanting.

Clara, who had never known the joys of motherhood, always experienced a feeling of envy on beholding the children of others; and instead of pausing to gaze at the charming picture, she hastily turned into the asphalt path leading to the quay.

She walked rapidly, and was only about fifty paces from the bridge when she perceived Albert Dartige advancing toward her from the opposite direction.

She did not wish to meet him, so, in order to avoid an embarrassing explanation with her defender of the Café Anglais, she pretended not to see him, and crossed to the other side of the street. But he had recognized her, and she had scarcely reached the other side of the street when he, too, crossed it with the evident intention of joining her.

Any attempt at flight would be ridiculous, so the countess paused and waited. M. Dartige, being a thoroughly well-bred man, bowed respectfully and began by apologizing for the liberty he was now taking; but Clara could see by his face that a mere interchange of commonplaces was not going to content him; nor was it at all unnatural that he should be anxious to know the consequences of their late adventure. The countess, realizing the fact, therefore resolved to anticipate the questions already upon his lips.

"Sir," she said, in a voice that trembled slightly, "I did not expect to see you again; but as chance has afforded me the opportunity, permit me to ask you to forget what has passed."

"You ask impossibilities," replied Dartige, quickly. "What do



you mean by the word: 'forget'? If you mean that I am not to noise the affair abroad, I am surprised that you should thus doubt my prudence and discretion. But my quarrel with Monsieur de Listrac must necessarily have its unpleasant consequences. I remained at home all the morning in the expectation of receiving a visit from his seconds, but—"

"You will receive no such visit. My husband has admitted that he has no reparation to ask of you, having no just grounds of offense against you."

"That is really very fortunate, but I shall send my seconds to him, nevertheless. He insulted me grievously by his rudeness, and I refrained from punishing him as he deserved, then and there, only because you were present."

"I am sure of that, and I am infinitely obliged to you for your consideration. But you will do even more for me. You will abstain from any step that will be likely to revive this absurd quarrel. I was the only witness of the scene, consequently your self-respect has sustained no injury."

"There you are very much mistaken. I would a thousand times rather receive a public affront than be humiliated in your presence."

"I do not consider that you were subjected to any humiliation. You acted in the most honorable manner, and the whole affair was the result of a deplorable misunderstanding. My husband himself admits this, now."

"Then let him apologize."

Mme. de Listrac started violently. She had not foreseen that the affair would take this turn. She had regarded it only from her husband's point of view, without thinking how Dartige might view the situation; but she now realized the necessity of an immediate and full explanation.

"You are excited," she said, gazing up at him with the large, dark eyes which had so troubled his peace of mind in years gone by, and which had lost none of their former beauty. "You have been my friend, and you are still my friend, I hope. May I speak to you frankly and without the slightest reserve?"

"Most assuredly."

"Then let us leave this much-frequented street. We both have many acquaintances in Paris, and it is unnecessary that we should be seen talking in such a public place."

As Mme. de Listrac spoke she led the way to a more secluded path that skirts the plat of orange-trees—a quiet and shady path, well adapted to confidential conversation—forgetting that the promenaders on the terrace above could hardly fail to take them for two lovers.

"Listen to me," she continued, "and do not be surprised if I remind you of a past that I am sure we both remember perfectly; and, above all, do not misunderstand my motive. I merely wish to prove to you that this past is dead—wholly dead, dead past all recall. You once loved me, I know—"

"And you did not love me in return," added Dartige, bitterly.

"That is true. I esteemed and liked you thoroughly, but I did not love you as you desired to be loved. Was that any fault of mine? Do you suppose that a woman can dispose of her heart. You know



that no one can control one's choice—you can not do it any more than I can. Love comes, or it does not come.”

“It came for another, however.”

“Yes, it was my fate; and you have no right to reproach me. I was compelled to yield to a power stronger than my own will. Nor was it the first time I ever loved—why should I hesitate to tell you this? It would have been different, very different, if the man I loved in my youth had not died. It was at Florence, when I had just made my *début* that an artist and poet inspired me with a love he returned. We were about to marry—the day for our union was appointed, when he was found one morning on the banks of the Arno with a dagger in his heart.”

“Does your husband know this?” inquired Dartige, ironically.

“Yes. Why should I have felt any desire to conceal it from him? Ten years had elapsed, and time is a great console. Of my first love, there remained only a bitter sweet memory. It was my destiny to love twice.”

“Why not three, or even four times?”

“The question is unworthy of you. If I had not entire confidence in you, I should not have shown myself to you as I really am. I believe that I was created to love, and I have a horror of deceit.”

“I have never regarded you as a coquette. But may I venture to ask what you are aiming at? All this has nothing whatever to do with my grievance against Monsieur Listrac, it seems to me. Would you have me understand that your married life is perfectly happy? Ah, well, faith in the partner of one's life is certainly a very excellent thing. Every one is not so fortunate as to possess it, however.”

“I assure you that my husband was perfectly innocent of any offense against me. He has explained his conduct to my entire satisfaction. I accused him unjustly. That being the case, I want you to promise me that you will let the matter drop, and that you will give up all idea of challenging him. If you should happen to be brought in contact with him I shall rely upon your promise.”

“I have promised nothing. I shall govern my conduct by his; that is all I can say. I fail to see what I shall gain by overlooking the insult I bore at the time only out of regard for you.”

“You will gain my friendship.”

“I am no believer in friendship between a man and a woman. It is only a deception and a snare.”

“I am ready to convince you to the contrary.”

“I do not care to make the experiment.”

“But what if I should tell you that I may need your friendship though you scorn mine? What if I should entreat yours? If I should need a defender, would you refuse me your aid?”

“No,” was the prompt reply; “I shall be entirely at your service, as you know perfectly well. But I shall never have an opportunity to serve you.”

“God alone knows what the future has in store for any of us.”

“I earnestly pray that he will save you from all sorrow; but if trouble should come, you may rely upon me. I have loved you, and still love you well enough to accept with gratitude any place in your life that you may see fit to give me. If we can be only



friends, so be it. But you can not prevent me from thinking of the past, and how I lost my heart the night I saw you for the first time in 'Romeo and Juliet.' Do you remember the evening that marked your first triumph in Vienna?"

"Yes, I was young then. I fear that if I were now to appear in the rôle of Juliet, in which I once achieved such success, no one would applaud me."

"You are mistaken, I am sure; besides, happy as you are now, you can not be contemplating a return to the stage."

"Who knows? I should have no other resource if I lost my fortune."

"You speak as if you had reason to apprehend approaching ruin. Can it be that your husband—"

"You, of course, are not aware that every penny of my money was settled upon myself, at my husband's particular request. Now promise to do what I ask, and I, in return, will promise to call upon you if any misfortune should befall me."

"So be it. If you ever have need of me, a line directed to No. 49 Rue de Bourgogne will be sure to reach me."

"I will remember that, my friend," said the countess, with a strong emphasis on the last word. "Now we must part. Our prolonged conversation will attract attention. There is one person watching us already. See."

"Who? that young lady over there on the bench?"

"Yes; she has not taken her eyes off us for some time."

"She is admiring you, doubtless."

"No, she probably sees that I am one of her countrywomen. Do you not see that she is an Italian?"

"She is a brunette, and has regular features, it is true; but to conclude from that, that she comes from the home of Mignon—"

"I am sure that I am right, and if we were anywhere but in a public garden, I should speak to her. But I must go. Farewell."

"No; *au revoir*."

Mme. de Listrac shook hands with him, and then walked rapidly away. He watched her sadly as she disappeared among the trees, then turned slowly toward the Place de la Concorde.

As he passed the young girl who had attracted Clara's attention, the idea of questioning her suddenly occurred to him, aroused, possibly, by a faint hope that a conversation with her might furnish him with a pretext for writing to Mme. de Listrac, for the old love was still too strong in his heart to make him willing to abandon all hope of seeing her or hearing from her again.

Still, he very much doubted if the countess had judged aright in taking the young girl for an innocent and unfortunate countrywoman, and he was the more inclined to doubt it as the person in question was now gazing at him as attentively as she had gazed at the countess.

Still, she did not smile nor seem in any way desirous of attracting his notice. On the contrary, her manner was grave and thoughtful. Her jet black hair, her olive complexion, and her large dark eyes indicated her southern origin beyond any possibility of doubt, while her simple attire betokened an unmistakable want of means; but she was certainly very beautiful, though hers was a peculiar



beauty which did not strike one at the first glance, but which Dartige could not fail to perceive on observing her more closely.

"Pardon me, mademoiselle," he said, pausing near the bench, "I have never had the pleasure of meeting you, but a lady who was just talking with me, and whom you seemed to be watching closely, bade me ask you if you knew her."

"No, sir. I was looking at her because I fancied that she was a countrywoman of mine," replied the young girl, in very excellent French.

"The lady is an Italian."

"So am I. I came from Florence."

"Indeed? I thought by your features that you were a Roman."

"My father was a Roman. That lady is too, probably. I thought she looked not unlike me."

"You excited considerable interest on her part. She fancied that you were a stranger in Paris, and that she might be of service to you."

"She was right. I arrived here only this morning, and I know nothing about the city."

"But you doubtless have friends or relatives here?"

"No, sir."

"May I venture to ask what you expect to do?"

"I hope to go upon the stage."

"As a *danseuse*?"

"No, as an opera singer. I have a good voice, and I have studied hard under a good master who tells me that I am prepared to make my *début* in either opera bouffe or opera."

"In that case, your instructor has probably given you a letter of recommendation to some manager."

"Not to a manager, but to one of his former pupils who has become quite celebrated, and who was a friend of my father's. She lives in Paris, and I hope she will not refuse to aid me. Unfortunately, my professor did not know her address, but he supposed almost anybody could give it to me. I inquired at the hotel where I am stopping, however, and showed the proprietor my letter, but he knew nothing about the lady."

"But do you know this prima-donna?" inquired Dartige, seating himself by the young girl's side.

"No, sir," she replied, without the slightest embarrassment. "I was but a child when she left Florence, and she has never been there since."

"How old are you, mademoiselle?"

"Sixteen."

She looked much older, however.

"And you were not afraid to undertake such a long journey alone?"

"My professor is a very old man, too old to accompany me."

"But why didn't you make your *début* in Florence?"

"I did not wish to. My father left an honored name there, and, had he lived, he would never have consented to my going on the stage in his native city."

"But he allowed you to study for the stage?"

"No, sir; I was an infant when I lost him. It was my own



choice—learning singing. My grandmother was bitterly opposed to it, but she finally consented.”

“I understand,” said Dartige, shaking his head. “You had no fortune, and you had to live.”

“No, that was not the reason, for though my father was not rich, he left me enough to live upon. I fitted myself for the profession purely from a love of it.”

This reply, made without the slightest hesitation, and in a perfectly natural tone, wrought a still greater change in the opinion of her listener.

“That is very fortunate,” he remarked, “for if you were without resources I hardly know what would become of you here in Paris. You are certainly pretty enough to find protectors, but—”

“I need no one’s assistance,” interrupted the girl, proudly.

“You will nevertheless be exposed to many dangers, especially in the profession you have chosen.”

“I have no fear that I shall not be able to make those around me respect me. I was never subjected to insult at home.”

“Paris is not Florence, mademoiselle,” said Dartige, smiling.

The smile spoiled everything, for the young Italian entirely mistook its meaning.

“If you mean that the first passer-by might venture to make love to a woman he had never seen before,” she said, haughtily, “I should say, in reply, that I did not encourage you to speak to me, and that our conversation has lasted long enough.”

“You misunderstand me, mademoiselle,” Dartige answered, eagerly. “If I ventured to speak to you it was only to gratify a desire expressed by the lady who just left me. The lady is an Italian, as I said before. but she married a Frenchman, the Count de Listrac. My name is Albert Dartige, and I am a secretary of Legation. Do you think I would tell you all this if I had not implicit confidence in you and your statements?”

The stranger looked at him searchingly, and saw that he was telling the truth.

“I believe you, sir,” she said, after a short silence, “and as you have told me your name, I will tell you mine. My name is Andrea Vitellio. My father, Vitale Vitellio, was a painter and poet. He wrote a tragedy that will not soon be forgotten, and if you ever go to Florence, you will see two of his pictures in the church of Santa Maria Novell.”

“I thank you for your confidence in me,” replied Dartige, who had never before heard of the great artist Vitellio or his works, “and if I can be of the slightest service to you, pray do not hesitate to say so. Will you pardon me if I remark that it surprises me to hear you speak French with such purity of accent?”

“My maternal grandmother was a Frenchwoman; and I learned your language with my own.”

“That is very fortunate, as you will have no difficulty in stating your case to the directors here. But one word of advice to begin with. In your country, any *padrone* would be able to give you full particulars in regard to any great singer you might be in search of; but in Paris hotel-keepers are not so conversant with what is going on in the musical world; and I am not surprised that yours could



give you no information when you showed him your letter. But I will tell you a very simple way of ascertaining the lady's address. You have only to ask the manager, or even the ticket-seller at any of our opera-houses."

"So they told me at my hotel. In fact, they recommended me to go to the Opera Comique, on the Boulevard des Italiens. I am stopping on the Rue de Beaune, and they told me that I had only to cross the Pont Royal and the garden of the Tuileries, and take the Rue de la Paix. I did not lose my way, but I fell in love with this great quiet garden. I love solitude. In Florence, I seldom or never went to the Caseine, but I used to spend hours in the Boboli gardens, where one sees nobody. After walking about for a while under the trees here, I finally seated myself upon this bench, and I am not sorry that I lingered, as I have had the good fortune to excite the interest of one of my countrywomen. But it is time that I resumed my walk, for I believe the opera-house is some distance from here."

"Not very far, mademoiselle; but perhaps I can give you the information you desire, and thus save you the trouble of going there. Have you the letter of introduction with you, and would you be willing to show it to me?"

"Certainly; here it is," replied the girl, taking it from a small satchel she carried on her arm. "But I warn you that my professor writes a very poor hand, and that the address is in Italian."

"I know enough of the language to decipher it, I think; besides, I am familiar with the intensely polite appellations in use in your country. I would be willing to wager almost any amount that an *all illustrissima signora, prima-donna assoluta* figures in the address."

"You are quite right. See!"

As she spoke, she handed Dartige an enormous square envelope, ornamented in each of the four corners with musical emblems, lyres, flutes, and violins, and bristling with capitals traced by an unpracticed hand. Near the bottom was this vague address: "*Nel suo palazzo, a Parigi*—at her palace, in Paris."

On seeing this, Dartige was seized by a strong desire to laugh, which deserted him, however, as soon as he perceived the name.

"Clara Monti!" he exclaimed, with a sudden change of tone and manner. "It was to Clara Monti that your professor recommended you?"

"Yes, to Clara Monti," replied the girl, surprised at her companion's evident astonishment. "You have heard of her, I see."

"All Europe has heard of her."

"I thought so."

"And your singing-master could not tell you what had become of her?"

"He only knew that she left the stage some years ago, and is now residing in Paris."

"But didn't he tell you why she renounced the stage?"

"No; he never reads the papers, and leads a very secluded life. I supposed that she had married."

"She is married."

"And consequently must have changed her name."



"Yes. She is a countess now."

"So much the better. She has been fortunate, and happiness makes one kind to others. She will receive me all the more cordially."

"I do not doubt it; but her husband—"

"Why should he treat me coldly?"

"Because your presence will remind him of his wife's past. He would like to forget that his wife was ever a singer."

"She has no cause to blush for it. I have often heard my old professor say that Clara Monti's life had always been irreproachable."

"Fashionable people have their prejudices. Besides, did you not tell me, only a moment ago, that your father, if he had lived, would never have allowed you to go on the stage?"

"But no one is ignorant of the fact that Clara Monti has sung in Vienna, Madrid, and St. Petersburg."

"That is true, but she sings nowhere now, and has broken off all connections with *impresarios*. But are you sure that your letter will have much weight with her? If she has lost sight of your instructor for fifteen years or more, it is quite likely that she has almost forgotten the worthy man."

"Then she must be very ungrateful, for it was he, Cesare Quaglia, who made her what she is; and even though she may have forgotten him, she certainly has not forgotten my father."

"Was she well acquainted with him?"

"So well that my father painted her in one of the pictures now in the Santa Maria Novella."

A suspicion, for which he instantly blushed, flashed through the mind of Dartige. Was it not more than probable that this girl of sixteen, who had come from Florence, was bound to Clara by a much closer and more tender tie?

These reflections were interrupted by Andrea.

"I am very grateful for your advice," she remarked, "but if you would give me Clara Monti's address, I should be still more deeply indebted to you. If you do not know her address, you must know the name she now bears, as you just told me that she had married a count. Do me the favor to tell me her name; and I am quite sure that I need trouble you no further."

Dartige dreaded the consequences of this young girl's proposed visit to Mme. de Listrac. What would the count say if he should happen to be with his wife when this young Italian presented a letter which perhaps contained allusions to events of which he was ignorant? The countess had assured him that happiness and peace now reigned in her household; but Dartige suspected that the wish was father to the thought. The slightest incident might renew the old discord, and the countess would never forgive him if he were even the indirect cause of it. At all events, Mme. de Listrac must be warned, in order that she might be prepared to receive her unbidden guest, or to close her doors against her, according as she saw fit.

"I am sure that your intentions are most laudable, mademoiselle," Dartige at last replied, cautiously; "but I am sure that this lady is obliged to exercise great prudence since her marriage, and that she



will be grateful to me if I apprise her of your intended visit. I see her occasionally, and I am a devoted admirer of hers, so I will repeat to her the conversation I have just had with you; and she will, I am sure, either appoint a time for your visit or call upon you. Would you be willing to intrust your letter to me for delivery?"

"No," was the frank reply. "I wish to deliver it in person. Indeed, I was particularly requested to do so by the writer."

"That being the case, I will return it to you," said Dartige, restoring the imposing-looking envelope to the girl. "It is not strange that you do not like to trust me with it, for you know nothing about me, and have no reason to believe in my sincerity. But you can tell me your address with perfect safety. Clara Monti shall be informed of it, through me, and I give you my word of honor that you will either receive a call or a letter from her within two days."

"So be it," replied the girl, without any apparent hesitation. "I am stopping at No. 22 Rue de Beaune. I will wait two days."

"Thank you. As a proof of my sincerity, I will add that if I should fail to keep my promise, you would not have the slightest difficulty in ascertaining the address of the countess. Her present address is well known at every opera-house in Paris; in fact, it is so widely known that if you should write to her without mentioning the street, your letter would reach its destination."

"I will also add that I shall not take the liberty of calling on you, but here is my card, and if I can be of any service to you, do not hesitate to let me know."

The young Italian took it without even glancing at it and dropped it into the satchel with her precious letter.

"Farewell, sir," she said, with quiet dignity. "I trust I shall not have cause to regret my confidence in you."

And she moved away, leaving Dartige greatly excited and perplexed. He had started out with the intention of paying a visit to his club, in which he had not set foot for five years, but of which he was still a member, having never failed to remit his yearly dues from St. Petersburg.

In his present state of mind, he would have preferred to postpone his visit until the next day; but the club was much nearer than the Rue Bourgogne where he lived, and he was anxious to write to Mme. de Listrac at once. He was likewise desirous of learning something about the life the Count de Listrac was leading, and by adroitly questioning some of his old friends he might succeed in doing this.

The afternoon had passed quickly, thanks to these unexpected meetings, and it was nearly nightfall when Dartige reached the club house.

The first rooms he entered were well-nigh deserted; but walking on in search of some familiar face, he finally found himself in the room specially reserved for baccarat, and here a goodly company was assembled.

Customs have changed at the clubs within the past few years. The members keep earlier hours. There are still men who play until broad daylight, but the majority of the members play between



the hours of four and seven, and one can easily impoverish one's self before dinner.

There was such a crowd about the table that Dartige was at first unable to see any of the players; but he at last succeeded in catching a glimpse of the gentleman who was keeping the bank—a very tall, spare man, with a cadaverous face, and an enormous sandy mustache.

A new member, probably, for Dartige felt sure that he had never seen him before.

On his right, and only a little distance from him, sat M. de Listrac, whom Dartige had no difficulty in recognizing. He was deeply engrossed in the game, and seemed to be winning, for there was a large pile of many colored chips in front of him.

"Poor countess!" thought Dartige. "This man deceived her last night, and to-night he is playing a game that may reduce her to penury at any moment, for I don't believe a word she told me about her fortune being settled on herself. And yet she thinks he loves her!"

Just then some one tapped him on the shoulder, and, turning, Dartige found himself face to face with a friend of former years, whom he had not seen since his departure for Russia, but who looked as hale and hearty as ever.

Club life preserves men until it kills them. They do not die like other men. They disappear some fine day, but they never fall ill and take to their beds.

"Well, here you are at last!" he exclaimed. "Let me look at you. You are not frozen. No; your nose is in its place, and your ears are not missing. You don't look a year older, either."

"But you, Chantal, have grown younger," replied Dartige, laughing. "How do you manage it? My limbs are all right, but my heart is a hundred years old."

"Provided the rest of you is only twenty-five, so much the better. But what are you talking about your heart here for? People will laugh at you. But how did you enjoy yourself in St. Petersburg?"

"Tolerably well. The Russians are pleasant enough; but unfortunately there are too many Germans there."

"No more than there are in Paris. Have you a long leave of absence?"

"Six months, and longer if I like."

"Good! We shall have time to become acquainted again. You must find the club greatly changed."

"The fact is, I see hardly any one here that I know; and if I had not met you, I should have gone before now. Tell me about some of these new members. Who is that tall fellow that is keeping the bank? He reminds me of Don Qixote."

"He is no Spaniard, however, but a Pole, and a very wealthy banker; and whether he wins or loses, he never even winks. I have never heard him utter a sound. The only sign of emotion he ever gives is to allow the cigar that never leaves his lips to go out."

"He must be losing, then."

"Yes. Such a thing does not often happen; but Listrac does seem to be getting the better of him this evening."



"Are you acquainted with Listrac?"

"No; I only know him by sight; I met him several years ago in Vienna; but we did not take to each other. Quite the contrary."

"In Vienna? There is where he married?"

"A singer, I believe," said Dartige, with pretended indifference.

"Exactly; he married the Monti, and a very foolish act it was on the diva's part. All great cantatrices are as stupid as owls. This one made oceans of money by her talent, and was as free as air; but she gave up the stage, and risked her fortune for the sake of becoming Madame la Comtesse."

"Risked her fortune? Why, Listrac is reputed to be wealthy, is he not?"

"He was; but he is not rich now. He has ruined himself completely by rash speculations, and he is not likely to retrieve his losses by baccarat. It is more than likely, therefore, that the Monti's gold will take to itself wings, especially as she is absurdly in love with him!"

"And doesn't he care for her?" inquired Dartige, eagerly.

"He was very much in love with her at one time, they say, and I believe they lived very happily together for awhile; but his affection seems to have cooled, and for several months past he has been about a little Baroness de Benserade, whom you may recollect, perhaps?"

"The one whose husband was killed in a duel by Gravigny?"

"The same."

"But what does Listrac's wife have to say about this infatuation on the part of her husband?"

"She is ignorant of it, probably. The matter has been kept pretty quiet, but there will be a tremendous scandal one of these days, for he is beginning to take less pains to conceal his folly. Last evening, for instance, or rather, last night, the baroness called here for him, and they went off to the Café Anglais, to supper, as openly as if he were still a bachelor. What do you think of that?" continued the skeptical Chantal. "Do you think that morals have improved much since your departure?"

"I think that Monsieur de Listrac is acting like a contemptible scoundrel, especially if the countess does not pay him back in his own coin."

"Oh, there is no danger of that! She is a paragon of virtue. I know a dozen men who have paid court to her, but who have had their labor for their pains. Do you see that middle-aged man over there, leaning over Listrac's shoulder, and watching his play?"

"Yes; he has a very unprepossessing face."

"He is quite a lady's man, for all that. His name is Raoul de Moulieres. No one knows his origin, though he pretends to be a nobleman. He is Listrac's evil genius, and a particular friend of the baroness. But look, this is something new! The Pole is rising. He must have lost heavily, for it is only five o'clock, and he is not in the habit of leaving until all the other players desert him. Listrac, too, is getting up, loaded with gold. I wonder if he will devote his money to paying his margins?"

The banker had given up his seat; but the count did not seem disposed to take possession of it, for he moved away, followed by the



faithful Moulieres, who wore an even more triumphant air than Listrac.

Dartige saw them take their stand in a distant corner, and if he could have overheard their conversation, he would have been able to gain a pretty thorough understanding of the dangers that threatened Clara.

"Bravo! my dear fellow," said Moulieres. "You must have won six or seven thousand louis."

"Six thousand six hundred," replied Listrac.

"You must not fail to report your good fortune to Madame de Benserade, but she would be even better pleased if you would dine with her this evening."

"Impossible. My wife made me promise to dine at home; but I shall call on the baroness later in the evening. What pleases me more than all else in the victory I have just gained, is that I shall be able to take up, to-morrow, the notes I gave to Menager."

"Take them up? And why, pray?"

"Because—because I do not care to leave them in his hands."

"Why should you object to that? They will not leave his safe, and you can pay them when they become due, that is, in three months."

"At the expiration of three months I may not be as well able to pay them as I am now, perhaps, so I had better do it while I have the money."

"Take care, my dear fellow, Menager's money has brought you good luck; but nothing brings misfortunes down upon a person like paying debts before they become due. Besides, I don't believe that Menager will allow you to take the notes up."

"He must certainly be insane if he refuses the money. Why, he would receive five thousand francs as interest for a loan of only forty-eight hours. He surely ought to be more than satisfied."

"Any one else would be, but I know Menager. He is a very methodical man, and all his notes are carefully filed away in the order of their dates in his safe, and he can not bear to take them out until the day arrives for their collection. I only tell you this to save you from unnecessary trouble. There is nothing to prevent you from trying however."

"That is exactly what I intend to do. Can't I count upon your assistance?"

"I will see him for you this evening, if you wish; but I warn you in advance that I shall not be successful. Besides, have you reflected that if you pay these notes now, Madame de Listrac, who indorsed them, will ask an explanation? In that case, you would be obliged to confess that you are in the habit of gambling, and that the money to pay these notes was obtained in that way."

"That makes no difference to me. I have no idea of allowing my wife to control my actions. See Menager for me, and try to induce him to consent to the immediate payment of the notes."

"I will try," answered Moulieres, shaking his head dubiously.

He thought:

"Yes; I will see him, but it will be to forbid the surrender of the notes. I want them presented to his wife so she can tell us whether the indorsement is genuine or not."



Just then Dartige and Chantal emerged from the crowd around the table. On perceiving the former, the count turned pale with anger, but he controlled himself. The place was not well adapted for an explanation; besides, he did not care for Moulières to hear it. Dartige had promised not to provoke a quarrel, so he moved away, and both gentlemen confined themselves to an interchange of looks; but the Count de Listrac was the first to lower his eyes.

"You do not seem to have any great love for each other," remarked Chantal, in a whispered aside.

Dartige made no reply. He was thinking of Mme. de Listrac, and he said to himself:

"I was going to write to her, but that will not suffice. I shall see her, even in defiance of her wishes. I will see her, and she shall know the true character of this man, for whose sake she rejected me!"

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#### CHAPTER IV.

ABOUT noon, on the day following that of Dartige's conversation with Andrea Vitellio, in the garden of the Tuileries, Mme. de Listrac was walking through her conservatory.

This conservatory was a veritable winter-garden, whose arrangement she had carefully superintended in person.

She had collected there almost every variety of tropical vegetation, and so luxuriant was the growth, that one might almost fancy one's self in a virgin forest. But this apparent disorder was only a carefully studied artistic effect. The walks were of the finest sand, and comfortable seats abounded.

A fountain played in a marble basin in the midst of this verdure, a babbling brook danced along among the flowers, and at the further end of the magnificent conservatory was a large aviary filled with rare birds.

It had been Clara's favorite retreat in the happy days when George had loved her with an undivided affection; and there she had spent entire days, even in winter, for the temperature was always that of summer, and every ray of sunshine found its way there.

The sun was shining brightly that day, and the place was gay with flowers, but poor Clara's heart was heavy indeed. She had received that same morning a letter from her notary, informing her that the sale of the house had been concluded at five hundred and ninety thousand francs, payable in eight days, upon the sole condition that the purchaser should take possession of the mansion and its appurtenances on the day of payment.

M. Jouin had not mentioned the name of the would-be purchaser, but he assured the countess that the solvency of the party was unquestionable and advised her to accept the terms in writing, without delay.

Clara had done so, though not without bitter tears, for she was deeply attached to this house in which the first years of her married life had been spent.

The thought of saving her husband from dishonor could alone mitigate the bitterness of this sacrifice, and she already felt compensated for it to some extent, at least, for George seemed to have



returned to his allegiance; but it was nevertheless hard to give up her home, and she now took a melancholy pleasure in revisiting this favorite nook and these rare plants which she would never see again.

There was not a single object here that was not endeared to her by some pleasant association. How often she and George had sat hand in hand upon that rustic sofa! How many times she had listened to the melody of the feathered songsters with her head resting upon her husband's shoulder. How often they had paced these pleasant walks together, with George's arm fondly encircling her waist while he murmured loving words in her willing ear!

And now Clara asked herself sadly if these happy hours would ever return, for George, though he was apparently endeavoring to make amends for his former coldness, was no longer the same man. There was a shadow of constraint in his manner and language that the almost exaggerated ardor of his caresses could not always conceal; and even in his fondest moments, Clara was tormented by a vague suspicion that he was thinking of another, for in cases like this, women are guided by an instinct that rarely deceives them.

Blind though she was, Clara did not feel completely reassured. A vague presentiment of coming trouble haunted her, and sometimes, as George's lips approached hers, it seemed to her that a face rose between them to intercept the kiss.

This face was always the hated face of the Baroness de Benserade, and though she had done her best to persuade herself that George did not care for this odious creature, and that his protestations of affection were sincere, the nightmare often returned.

At that very moment it was still oppressing her, and her recent visit to the Marquise de Marvejols recurred to her mind again and again. That lady persisted in the charges against her cousin with all the stubbornness of an old woman who has but few ideas, but who clings to those she has. She furnished no proofs of the truth of her assertions, but she repeated again and again: "Be on your guard, my dear. The Listracs have always deceived their wives, and have not unfrequently ruined them. It is in the blood, and George will prove no exception to the rule."

Dartige was evidently of the same opinion though he expressed himself with greater reserve.

On the evening following their meeting in the garden of the Tuileries, he had called and asked to see her; but the countess had sent word that she was engaged, and he had gone away after telling the footman that he would write to his mistress.

The promised letter had not made its appearance, and Clara had made up her mind not to answer it if it came.

By way of compensation, Dartige had kept his promise in regard to his quarrel with the count, for the latter had received no challenge, and he had taken good care not to tell his wife that he had met his enemy in the club-house where he had solemnly promised never to set foot again.

He had even more carefully abstained from telling her of his enormous gains. He had even accepted the check that she had given him to pay his so-called debts of honor, and this nobleman who had just won one hundred and thirty thousand francs from the Polish banker, in less than an hour, never thought of offering the



money to his wife to indemnify her in part for the sale of her house.

Clara, ignorant of all this, thought only of devising means to preserve him as much as possible from the annoyances that must inevitably result from the great change in their circumstances.

The fashionable Count de Listrac would soon find himself reduced to a comparatively humble mode of living. The renting of apartments in a much less fashionable neighborhood was now an absolute necessity, as well as the furnishing of them in a style suitable to the altered means of their occupants. In short, it was now necessary to live on an income of thirty thousand francs, after living for years upon an income of one hundred and twenty thousand, which had scarcely sufficed to meet their expenses, and as a natural consequence their horses, carriages and retinue of servants must be dispensed with, unless they wisely resolved to retire to the country as Clara desired. She had already suggested this exodus to her husband, but though he had not absolutely refused, George had turned a deaf ear to the proposal, and the brave woman had made up her mind to endure that mediocrity, which is a hundred times harder to bear in the city than in the country.

In short, she was resigned to anything except the intolerable thought of a rival. She would rather die than submit to that degradation, and the mere idea of such a thing awakened the most violent resolves.

These gloomy thoughts did not haunt Clara there in her winter garden, however, for the soothing influence of her surroundings gradually asserted itself and she finally began to feel calm and even hopeful. She gathered some camellias with the intention of presenting them to George, who had a fondness for scentless flowers as for heartless women. He had promised to return early to dine, and spend the evening with her, and she was already planning to make herself beautiful in his eyes, and to sing some of his favorite airs, among them the famous, "*Ah, je n'i pu m'en defendre*," from the first act of "*Romeo et Juliette*," in which she had achieved such success on the stage, and which would remind him of her former triumphs.

These pleasing illusions were disturbed by the entrance of a footman.

"A lady wishes to see the house, madame," he announced.

Mme. de Listrac, greatly astonished, suddenly recollected that her notary had spoken of a lady's desire to purchase the house, and supposed that this was the person who now wished to inspect it, though rather late in the day, as it had been disposed of the evening before.

"Did the lady give her name?" she inquired.

"Yes, madame. She told me twice that she was the Baroness de Benserade."

This announcement was so startling that Mme. de Listrac thought she must have misunderstood him.

"You must be mistaken," she replied, "I am not acquainted with that lady."

"Pardon me, madame, but I am sure that was the name."

"Then tell her that I never see strangers," was the quiet though haughty reply.



"The lady added that she would be very sorry to disturb madame, and that she only wished to see the interior of the house while madame was in the garden."

This announcement completed Mme. de Listrac's exasperation, for she suddenly recollected that the notary on informing her of the conclusion of the transaction, had failed to mention the name of the purchaser. Nothing whatever had been said about Mme. de Benserade. Had her name been even mentioned in connection with the matter, the countess would have cut the negotiations short at once.

But whether this baroness was the purchaser or not, Clara was not the woman to recoil, so turning to the servant, she said quietly:

"Very well, tell the lady that she has my permission to go through the house, and then bring her to the conservatory without telling her that I am here. You can accompany her as far as the door, and then leave us alone together."

The footman withdrew and Mme. de Listrac nerved herself to meet her enemy.

Pale with indignation, and trembling with anger she stepped behind a clump of camellias which would partially conceal her from view, without preventing her from seeing the approach of the odious baroness.

The conservatory occupied a corner of the garden, and to enter it from the court-yard, one was obliged to walk the whole length of it. Mme. de Benserade had been admitted at the gateway on the Rue de Monceau, and had consequently walked around the house without passing through it, so she now approached the conservatory by the longest way, instead of directly from the mansion.

The countess therefore had ample time to notice her rival's manner and toilet. Clara had often seen her in the Bois, or at the theater, but had never had an opportunity to look at her so closely.

She did not walk, this baroness, but strutted along, with her nose high in the air, casting sharp glances on every side, and staring at the windows of the mansion. Hers was a triumphal entry, the entry of a *chatelaine* who sets foot upon her domain for the first time.

She was dressed not tastefully, but audaciously after the fashion, not of to-day, but of to-morrow, or rather of next season. Imitations of tapestry being the fabric most in vogue, she wore a rich brocade that was thickly inwrought with thread of gold, and that looked exactly like furniture covering. Feminine head-gear being a triumph of the taxidermist's rather than the milliner's art, hers was composed of the breast of some gorgeous bird with the soft-curling neck feathers for a border, and the head for a trimming. Though the winter was exceedingly mild, furs were the rage; her wrap was of Siberian squirrel elaborately trimmed with blue fox.

Clara Monti was clad in a white cashmere wrapper, buttoned high in the throat, and her heavy braids of magnificent black hair were her only ornament.

She was beautiful. Her rival was only pretty, but she knew how to bewitch men, while Clara only knew how to love.

"The garden is not very large, but it is very well kept," Clara heard the baroness say, though whether she was talking to herself



or to the footman who was following her at a respectful distance, the countess was unable to determine. "This conservatory looks promising. I must see if it is as tastefully arranged within as without. However, it is probable that I shall make a good many changes, as the house is not very likely to suit me in all respects."

This disparaging remark brought the blood to the cheeks of the countess who still refused to believe the evidence of her own senses. It seemed to her that this woman was trying to insult her by thus talking as if the house belonged to her; and taking a step forward, she suddenly confronted the audacious visitor.

The footman, in obedience to the orders he had received, hastily withdrew, and the two rivals were left standing face to face, like two duelists.

Juliette did not flinch. She had certainly foreseen the encounter. Perhaps she had even sought it, for it is hardly likely that she had followed the servant without suspecting that he was conducting her into his mistress' presence.

Clara was equally composed. She had one advantage over the baroness. She was in her own house, and consequently had a right to ask this intruder what had brought her there. But this beginning would only be a skirmish preparatory to the real combat.

"I am utterly at a loss to divine the object of your visit, madame," she said, coldly.

"Excuse me, madame," said Mme. de Benserade, undismayed by this freezing reception. "I ought to have written and apprised you of my intention of calling to-day. It would have been more courteous, I know, but I had not time. I did not learn until last evening that the sale had been concluded, and I was very anxious, I admit, to see the property I had purchased without examining it, and purely on the strength of the description given by some one who is well acquainted with it. I was unfortunate in the selection of my time, but if I intrude I will withdraw, only begging you to appoint a day and hour at which I can call again without disturbing you."

All this was said in a perfectly natural tone, as if the matter involved was the most trivial possible.

The heart of the countess sunk within her.

"Did you say you had purchased this house?" she asked.

"Certainly. Were you not aware of the fact? The person who acted as my agent signed the papers last evening, after seeing the written consent you had sent to your notary."

"I did accept the conditions he made known to me, but I was ignorant of the purchaser's name."

"The name makes no difference, it seems to me."

"You may think so, but I do not; and you will need no better proof of it than the fact that I withdraw my consent. I wish to sell my house, but not to you."

"That is not very flattering to me, but you must permit me to say that it is too late for you to change your mind."

"I shall see my notary immediately, and tell him that I will not consent to the sale."

"You no longer have the right to do it, madame. I am fully informed on this subject. I can not take possession of the property



until the money is paid, but it is ready. Payment will be made on the 29th, and I am now the owner of the property."

"In spite of me? We will see."

"You will see, madame. If you are resolved upon a lawsuit, so be it. I shall not relinquish my claim, and I have the law on my side. I have had legal advice on this point."

Clara Monti was absolutely ignorant of the laws that govern real estate, and she began to understand what her haste had cost her. She had given her notary full power to act for her in this matter, and M. Jouin could not know that his client was anxious to sell to any person whatsoever, except Mme. de Benserade. But although it might be too late to retract what she had so imprudently done she resolved that she would instantly check the impertinence of this insolent baroness who was taking advantage of this opportunity to humiliate her.

"I shall enter into no legal contest with you, madame," she said, haughtily. "We should not be equally matched, and I should lose too much by it, even if I should gain my suit, for it would be the first time my name was ever dragged into the courts."

"Then you never had any unfortunate differences with the managers who hired you to sing?" inquired Mme. de Benserade, with an insolent affectation of interest.

This was the signal for open hostilities. After this declaration of war the countess need hesitate at nothing.

"No more than you have had with your numerous lovers, I suppose," she replied, with withering scorn.

"You are very much mistaken," the baroness replied, with unruffled composure. "I often have them. Ask your husband if you do not believe me. We had a violent quarrel only yesterday."

Clara, though cut to the quick, conquered the emotion that almost choked her.

"So Monsieur de Listrac is one of your devoted admirers?" she said, coldly.

"I am surprised that you are not aware of the fact. All Paris knows that he is desperately in love with me," retorted Mme. de Benserade with unparalleled assurance. "After what occurred at the Café Anglais the other evening you ought to have no further doubts on the subject. You got the best of me that evening. The count still has some scruples, and to avoid a scene I relinquished him to you. To-day I am having my revenge."

"Was it my husband who advised you to purchase the house I have just sold to pay his debts?"

"No, I have not consulted him, and I shall pay for it with my own money. But even if he had given me the money, what business is it of yours? George is rich, richer than you are, and he has a perfect right to dispose of his fortune as he chooses."

To hear George's name thus familiarly mentioned by this woman exasperated Clara beyond endurance.

"Leave this house; leave it instantly!" she exclaimed, in a low tone of concentrated rage and contempt, and pointing imperiously to the door.

"Very well, I am going," sneered the baroness. "I shall have plenty of time to examine the house after you leave it. Don't for-



get that the money will be paid over to your notary on the 29th of January, and that I shall take possession of my new home on the following day. You must make your preparations to move the day before, that is, unless you prefer to leave me the furniture. I might consent to take it—I don't know. People tell me you have tolerably good taste, and if you will sell me the furniture I shall only have my clothing to bring."

Speechless with rage, Clara advanced a step toward the heartless creature who thus insulted her, and gave her a look that made Mme. de Benserade recoil, and then beat a final retreat, though not without sending a Parthian shaft at her rival.

"I see that we shall not come to a satisfactory understanding," she remarked, "but I shall hold you to the bargain already concluded, and you must move on the 28th. I must go now, as I am expecting a call from your husband this morning."

Mme. de Listrac watched her as she strutted away, and when the baroness had disappeared around a turn of a path the poor betrayed, heart-broken creature sunk half fainting upon a seat in the conservatory.

Her rage and indignation had changed to profound despair, and she burst into tears. The hopes she had based upon her husband's protestations of repentance crumbled away. Her life was ended.

George had deceived her, while pretending to still love her. George had supped at the Café Anglais with this unscrupulous creature, and to excuse himself had invented a story which no child would have believed. He had sunk to such depths of degradation as to sell his caresses, for in seeking a reconciliation his only object had been to extort money from his wife.

And with what refined cruelty he removed the mask only two days after he attained his object, for whatever his accomplice might say to the contrary he could not be ignorant of the fact that she had purchased the house on the Rue de Monceau, and his heart had not revolted at the thought that she was going to take his wife's place in the home where their honeymoon had been spent.

This last exhibition of heartlessness seemed so incredible that the countess could scarcely believe it; besides, a little reflection convinced her that however great her husband's infatuation for the Baroness de Benserade might be it was greatly to his interest to remain on good terms with his wife, or in other words, not to kill the goose that laid the golden eggs.

His account with his broker was not yet settled, and there was nothing to prevent his wife from keeping the money derived from the sale of the house instead of giving it to him in accordance with his expectations.

Clara did not know that George had won very large sums of money at the card-table within the past three days, and was consequently in a position to repair his losses at the Bourse by his winnings from the Polish banker, and that, carried away by his infatuation for Juliette de Benserade he was already wondering if he should not abandon his wife as soon as she had paid his debts.

Clara could not conceive of such infamy as this, but in spite of the illusions she still cherished she resolved to have an interview with her husband—an interview which should be the last if he



failed to vindicate himself completely. This time she would not allow herself to be duped by his apparent tenderness. She would demand proofs, even if it became necessary to confront him with Mme. de Benserade to obtain them. Moreover, she resolved that she would leave the house immediately if the result of the interview should prove unfavorable, so she decided to go to her room, and, after dressing and making the necessary arrangements for departure, repair to the little *salon* to play her last card in the place where she had played her first, and lost.

One hour after the departure of the baroness Clara was ready, and sat counting the minutes on the dial—the dial she had so often consulted since her troubles began.

To allay her impatience she at last began to walk up and down the room, pausing occasionally to glance out of the window overlooking the street.

George had gone out in his coupé, and she would recognize the carriage and coachman some distance off.

There was no carriage in sight, but on looking out of the window for the seventh or eighth time Clara saw a gentleman pause in front of the house, glance at the number, and then ring at the door of the porter's lodge.

She had never seen this gentleman before, but she had a presentiment that his visit was in some way connected with George. He did not look like a tradesman. On the contrary, he was fashionably dressed, but while waiting for some one to answer the bell he examined the contents of a wallet which he had drawn from his overcoat pocket. Had the countess owed any money the idea that the man had called to request the payment of a bill would have instantly occurred to her, but she did not, so she concluded that he had merely called to leave a letter.

Consequently she was not very much surprised when her maid entered to inform her that a gentleman wished to speak to her on business connected with the count, and without inquiring the visitor's name she ordered the servant to usher him into the room.

He made his appearance a moment afterward, and in spite of his affected ease of manner it was very evident that he was loath to broach the object of his visit.

"What is your business with me?" she asked, dryly.

"Is it to the Countess de Listrac that I have the honor of speaking?" inquired the man.

"Yes; what have you to say to me?"

"I have called, madame, to show you three notes, and to inquire if you are willing to acknowledge your signature."

"Three notes!" replied the countess. "You must be mistaken, sir. I have given no notes, for I owe nothing."

"Oh, it is not a question of immediate payment. These notes will not become due until the 22d of April."

"By whom were they given?"

"By the Count de Listrac, your husband."

Clara was prepared for this response, so it did not disconcert her. This was evidently another debt contracted by George.

"My husband's business obligations do not concern me," she re-



plied. "My property was settled upon myself by the provisions of our marriage contract. You are probably ignorant of that fact."

"Pardon me, madame; but I am perfectly well aware of it, and however good Monsieur de Listrac's credit may be, I would not have loaned him a hundred thousand francs if you had not guaranteed the payment of the amount. Loaning money is my business, and I must take my precautions."

Clara still failed to understand him.

"When did you loan this money?" she asked.

"Day before yesterday, madame. You are aware that Monsieur de Listrac has met with some very heavy losses of late. He is rich enough to bear them, of course, but he was in need of ready money, so he applied to me."

It cut Clara to the heart to learn that on the very day of their reconciliation George had borrowed money without apprising her of the fact. It certainly could not have been to spare his wife the bitter necessity of parting with her home, for he evidently intended to keep the money for his personal use, as he had taken pains to conceal the transaction from her.

But though the news filled her with deep indignation, the end was not yet.

"To one of your wealth a transaction of one hundred thousand francs is of no very great importance," resumed the man; "still, I am surprised that you have forgotten the date of it."

"I do not understand you."

"But you must recollect the circumstance, madame. Do you not remember that Monsieur de Listrac came to you about three o'clock in the afternoon to ask this favor, which you must have granted with very good grace, for he left my house on the Rue Goudot, and returned to it in less than an hour?"

"Explain more clearly, if you please, sir," interrupted Clara, who was beginning to suspect the frightful truth.

"He returned the three notes to me with your indorsement," continued the money-lender, "and I, of course, gave him the money at once."

"With my indorsement?" repeated the countess, falteringly.

"Certainly; and but for your indorsement I should not have loaned him a penny; for, between you and me, your husband is irretrievably ruined."

Clara's last hope vanished, and she realized the depth of the abyss into which George had fallen. He had forged his wife's name in order to obtain money from an usurer, regardless of the deplorable consequences which would inevitably ensue.

"He doubtless intended to excite my compassion by fresh protestations of affection when the notes became due," she thought, bitterly. "He did not foresee that the man would come to ascertain if the indorsement was genuine, only a day or two after the loan. Nor does he know that I have only to say the word to ruin him."

"All this is no explanation of the object of your visit," she said, quietly, though her face was death-like in its pallor.

"The explanation is very simple, however," replied the money-lender. "I have not the honor of knowing you, madame, and when Monsieur de Listrac brought me your indorsement, I of course could



not be certain that the handwriting was yours; so I concluded to submit the notes to your inspection in order to ascertain if the signatures are genuine."

"A useless precaution, it seems to me, as you have discounted the notes. It would have been far better for you to have accompanied Monsieur de Listrac when he came to ask the favor of me."

"I did think of it," replied Menager, with some embarrassment; "but I feared to offend him by seeming to doubt his word."

"Your scruple might have cost you dear. What if I should deny the genuineness of the indorsement you have accepted?"

The usurer turned pale. The question had every appearance of being the prelude to a denial.

"In that case I should not hesitate a moment," he replied. "On leaving your house I should enter a formal complaint against your husband; and, as all men are equal in the eyes of the law, Monsieur de Listrac, in spite of his title, would sleep in prison to-night. This, too, would be only the beginning of an unpleasant journey to the penitentiary, *via* Mazas, and the Court of Assizes."

"Spare yourself the trouble of uttering these ridiculous threats," interrupted the countess. "Monsieur de Listrac has nothing to fear from the law. It is only necessary for me to see if the notes you hold are really those I indorsed. Will you have the goodness to show them to me?"

Menager needed no urging.

They were in his wallet, and he promptly produced them.

Clara took them with a hand that did not tremble in the least, glanced at them, and walking toward a rosewood desk at the further end of the room said, quietly,

"Very well, I will pay you."

Menager found himself in a very embarrassing position. Moulieres had forbidden him to give up the notes, even if the indorsements were not genuine; and though he had not explained the use he intended to make of them, his partner suspected that he wished to retain them as a weapon against George de Listrac. But Menager, who had no reason to hate that gentleman, looked at the matter from an entirely different point of view; and, seeing an opportunity to reap a rich profit from the transaction, could not make up his mind to renounce it.

Still, to quiet his conscience, he felt obliged to enlighten Mme. de Listrac.

"I repeat, madame, that these notes will not become due for three months," he said. "You are not compelled to take them up now."

Clara did not pay the slightest attention to his words. She had taken a large package of bank-notes from the desk, and, adding to it five notes which she took from another package, she handed it to Menager, saying:

"Count it, if you please."

He did count it, after laying his hat on a chair.

"Now, go," said Mme. de Listrac, in a tone that admitted of no reply.

So, with a low bow, he withdrew, leaving Clara Monti standing there with the written proofs of her husband's dishonor in her hands.



Close upon the insulting visit of her rival had come the knowledge of her husband's infamy. This was too much. Indignation had given place to disgust.

After begging money from his wife, after kneeling before her, and extorting money from her by his protestations of love, and his caresses, he had stooped to forgery.

"Oh, the wretch! the miserable wretch!" murmured Clara. "I learned an hour ago that he had no heart, but I did not know until now that he was utterly devoid of honor. I sold this house to pay his debts, and he was confident that I would pay even more to save him from prison. What philter has the sorceress for whose sake he has sacrificed me, given him? I will not degrade myself by competing with her! Let her keep him! Let her drag through the mire the name I will no longer bear! I should die of shame and humiliation, if I remained here with him another day. I will leave this house, and will never willingly look upon his face again! If I hated him I might again come to love and forgive him; but I despise him, and one can never love an object of scorn and contempt. All is over now. George de Listrac has ceased to exist for me. I am going away. He shall not find me here."

This resolve was perfectly natural, but it was not easy to carry it into execution. She had the means to lead an independent life, it is true, but a person of her rank can not leave her home and husband, no matter how unworthy he may be, without giving any warning or making some arrangement for the future."

Where should she go? To the Grand Hotel, like a stranger in the city? Such an arrangement might answer for awhile; but she had no very clear idea of her husband's rights in the matter of enforcing a return to her home, and she thought it more than probable that she would be obliged to leave France.

Just then, her maid entered with a letter. Clara took it and opened it with a vague presentiment that the contents might prove of importance, and perhaps solve the problem for her.

The letter was from Albert Dartige.

On seeing the signature, Mme. de Listrac made an impatient movement. Was it in this way that he kept his promise of forgetting the past, and contenting himself with her friendship?

A glance at the opening sentence showed her that Dartige did not deserve her displeasure, however.

The contents of the letter were as follows:

"MADAME,—I called at your house yesterday in vain. I was impelled to take a step you had forbidden by the fact that I had some news which would certainly interest you.

"On leaving you, after an interview which I shall never forget, I accosted the young lady you had noticed; and, in accordance with the wish you expressed, inquired into her situation.

"She is an Italian, as you supposed, and has come to Paris to make her *début* as an opera singer. It seems that she has an excellent voice, and her instructor has assured her that she is tolerably sure to succeed upon the stage; but she has no friends in Paris, and bases all her hopes upon a letter of introduction to a famous singer, given her by her teacher."



"Poor girl!" murmured Mme. de Listrac. "If she but knew to what operatic successes lead! I should like to enlighten her, and, if I can, be of service to her in any way."

She continued her reading. She had just reached a passage where a great surprise awaited her:

"I should not trouble you with this rather commonplace story, if this young girl had not told me the name of the great artiste whose protection she seeks.

"The great artiste is yourself."

"I!" exclaimed the countess. "Has he lost his senses, or is this merely a pretext for renewing an acquaintance I desire broken off?"

"Yes, madame, I saw the letter addressed to Clara Monti; and the man who wrote it, once had the honor of numbering you among his pupils.

"His name is Cesare Quaglia, and he teaches singing in Florence."

"Quaglia! good old Quaglia, who gave me my first lessons in solfeggio! I had almost forgotten him, but I am glad to learn that he is still living. He must be a hundred! He did quite right to write to me, and his *protégée* can rely upon my assistance."

"This was a singular meeting, was it not?" she read on, "and you little suspected that it was you this black-eyed girl was seeking.

"But it will surprise you still more to learn that she had not the slightest idea that you were now the Countess de Listrac. Her instructor himself did not know it. He had heard that you left the stage in order to marry, and that was all. Need I add that I did not feel at liberty to send your young countrywoman to you before satisfying myself that you were willing to see her? I therefore contented myself with telling her that I might be able to obtain your address for her.

"I offered to transmit Cesare Quaglia's letter to you, but she refused to intrust it to me.

"I wished above all to make sure that she spoke the truth, and that she was no adventuress; and in order that you might be able to judge for yourself, I asked her to tell me her name and history; whereupon she told me a rather romantic story, which I will faithfully repeat to you.

"She is seventeen, she told me. She was born in Florence, like yourself, and belongs to a highly respectable family. She never saw her mother, but her grandmother, on her mother's side, was a Frenchwoman, so the girl speaks French as well as she does Italian. Her father was a painter and a poet—"

"That is strange!" murmured the countess.

"Who left quite a famous name in Florence, at least so she asserts, and she assures me that some of his pictures appear to very good advantage among some by the old masters, in one of the churches of his native city.

"I should add that this great artist was a friend of yours, if we can believe his daughter Andrea, who can speak only by hearsay,



however, for she was but an infant when he died from an accident, as nearly as I can understand."

Clara understood perfectly, and her pallor betrayed profound emotion.

"His name was Vitale Vitellio," she read.

"He!" she murmured, "he was the father of this girl who is looking for me! Yes, a daughter was born to him about two years before his untimely death. She was the fruit of his marriage with a French actress, whom he had met at Milan, and who died in childbirth. He told me the sad story. The child was placed in his grandmother's charge, but I should have loved and cared for her as if she had been my own, if I had married Vitale. And she is in Paris, she needs my protection! Oh, it is God who sends her to me! I was wondering if I should have the courage to live—I will live for her sake."

"But where shall I find her? Dartige does not say, unless he tells me here at the close of the letter."

Turning to the next page, she read:

"That is all, madame. It is now for you to decide what you will do for this young girl, for whom I must admit that I feel a deep sympathy. She does not know the name you bear or where you live, consequently she can not present herself at your house; but I inquired her address, so that you might call upon her if you wished to do so. She is staying at No. 22 Rue de Beaune, and you will be almost certain to find her at home if you conclude to call upon her.

"You see, madame, that I am confining myself strictly to the friendly rôle which you have assigned to me. I may also add that I have kept my word in abstaining from any further altercation with the person who so deeply affronted me. Very soon after my conversation with you I met Monsieur de Listrac at the club to which we both belong. I did not speak to him, and he pretended not to know me. It is true that he was playing cards and winning heavily at the time, and, perhaps, that is the reason he did not honor me with his attention. But however that may have been, you may rest assured that we shall remain upon this footing of mutual indifference, unless he should challenge me, which I do not consider at all probable."

"He was gambling!" murmured the countess, sorrowfully, "gambling only a few hours after he swore at my feet to renounce the follies that have brought him where he is. He was winning, and yet allowed me to impoverish myself for his sake. Wretch! coward! hypocrite! And I have worshiped this man! and I am not even sure that I do not still love him! Ah! I will no longer be obliged to submit to his treacherous caresses, and listen to his atrocious falsehoods. I will leave this house, never to return. To console me for so many efforts I shall have a daughter to protect and a friend, for Dartige consents to be a true friend and nothing more. I misjudged him. His letter shows him in his true character, and I feel that I can depend upon him. He will be the friend I so much



need, and he will assist me in insuring a happy future to Vitale's daughter. Why did she not think of applying to me long ago? I should have had an aim in life then, and the memory of her father might perhaps have saved me from the foolish passion which has broken my heart."

Just then the clock struck three. The sound reminded her that it was time for her to depart if she wished to carry her plans into execution. The count might return at any moment, and she had sworn never to see him again.

She placed in a small Russia leather satchel all the money and valuable papers that were not in her banker's custody, and also the three notes she had just paid; then she put on the first cloak and bonnet she could lay her hands upon, without calling her maid.

She would not even send for a carriage. The footman might notice the number of it, and her husband thus be able to discover where she had gone.

She did not take these precautions because she had any idea of disappearing altogether. She could not endure the idea of concealing herself as if she had been guilty of some crime: on the contrary, she intended to speedily reappear and allow public opinion to judge between her husband's conduct and her own. It would first be necessary to consult her lawyer in regard to the sale of the house, however, and upon the best means of legalizing her separation from M. de Listrac. Consequently she must remain for a few days at least in seclusion, and she could find no more effectual way to silence scandal than to spend this interval in the company of Andrea Vitellio.

She could not go, however, without notifying her husband of her departure, and of her determination not to return. If she failed to do this, the count, persevering in his rôle, would not fail to proclaim his loss from the housetop, and perhaps even inform the police of his wife's disappearance in order to convey the impression that she had fled with a lover.

A note would suffice. She knew that he would come straight to the little *salon* in which she usually waited for him, and which the servants never entered unbidden, so taking a sheet of paper she placed it in a conspicuous place on a table, after writing upon it these words:

"I have just paid three notes which you drew upon me, and which a usurer presented to me for payment. I have also received a visit from the person who purchased the house I sold to pay your debts.

"This is enough. I am going away. Forget me, as I shall forget you, and never try to see me again. Farewell."

She signed herself Clara Monti, as if to show him that the Countess de Listrac no longer existed.

Five minutes afterward she crossed the threshold of the house that now belonged to her successful rival, and walked down the Rue de Monceau without once turning to look behind her.



## CHAPTER V.

A MONTH has passed. The sacrifice is consummated. Mme. de Benserade had paid for the house, and is now installed in the former home of the Countess de Listrac, who has left her husband.

The fact is known everywhere. All Paris is aware that the count has been abandoned by his wife, and that he is consoling himself by devoted attentions to the Baroness de Benserade. The majority of people do not consider him in the least to blame.

The count has met all his obligations, though he might have taken advantage of the law that ignores all gambling debts. No one inquires where he obtained the large amount of money needed to satisfy his creditors. Some of the less charitable insinuate that it was gained at baccarat, for he continues to win at the club, and the Polish banker is supposed to be on the verge of ruin. No one thinks of the victim, the heroic Clara Monti, who has robbed herself to save her husband.

People even pity him. They say that his wife has deserted him for a lover. Others, who are a little better informed, declare that she is living quietly in an obscure part of the city and devoting herself to the education of an illegitimate daughter, who was born previous to her marriage, and whom she recently found in the streets of Paris.

George de Listrac conducts himself in the most exemplary manner. He left the house on the Rue de Monceau on the very evening of his wife's disappearance, and has since rented a handsome suite of apartments on the Champs Elysees. Even the Marquise de Marvejols has taken his part. The old busybody denounced him to his wife before the rupture, but afterward she heaped the bitterest invectives upon the former singer, who dared to create such a scandal, and now zealously sustains Listrac, less from sympathy than from a spirit of caste probably.

As for Juliette de Benserade, she is triumphant, exultant. She has driven away her rival, and secure in her wealth and complacency, is more than ever determined to marry George when a divorce shall set him at liberty, or his wife shall have died of a broken heart. The eminent lawyers that have been consulted on the subject seem to be of the opinion that it will not be difficult to secure the annulment of a marriage contracted in Austria between a Frenchman and an Italian. Moreover, there is a strong probability of a speedy modification of the Napoleonic Code. She hopes that the Chamber of Deputies will soon act on this matter; and if she prayed at all she would not neglect to invoke a nightly blessing upon the honorable M. Naquet.

M. de Moulieres continues to act as her confidential adviser. She does not pay much attention to his advice, but invariably consults him.

They are near neighbors now, for he resides in elegantly furnished apartments on the Rue de Teheran, where he leads the life



of a wealthy gentleman of leisure. He breakfasts in his rooms, but dines out, generally at the club.

This independent mode of life suits his tastes, and is comparatively inexpensive, though economy appears to be no object with him, as he seems to have plenty of money at his disposal and spends it freely. He always has a hundred louis at the service of his friends, and has a most delightful way of forgetting these trifling loans. As a natural consequence, his praises are in everybody's mouth, at the club and elsewhere.

No one would be so ungracious as to put any troublesome questions to such an obliging gentleman. All inquiries in regard to his antecedents are strictly tabooed. It is enough that he is always to be seen at the club, at all the first performances at the leading theaters, and in the most aristocratic drawing-rooms. Paris is a city where a person's origin is a matter of trivial importance. One troubles one's self only about the present, and Raoul de Moulieres' present is, or seems to be, irreproachable.

Dropping in at the house of Mme. de Benserade one March morning, on his way to the club, he found that lady half reclining in an arm-chair, with a decidedly petulant expression upon her pretty face.

"What is the matter, my dear Juliette?" he asked, smiling. "Your usually radiant countenance wears a cloud this morning. One would almost think that you had been crying."

"Oh, not yet, but I shall end with that, for I am bored to death, and feel terribly out of spirits."

"This is certainly something new for you. You must have the vapors, as they used to say in Louis Fifteenth's time, for you certainly have every reason to be perfectly happy. Your conquest of Listrac is complete enough to satisfy the most exacting, and you have driven his wife from her home. Listrac and the house are both yours."

"Yes; and at first I enjoyed my twofold triumph hugely. I took the most intense delight in metamorphosing the cage in which that blackbird used to sing her love duets with George. I even threw away all the plants in the conservatory, in order that there should be no trace of her reign; but now I have done all this, I am beginning to tire of this great barrack, I am lost in the house. My old home on the Rue de Suresnes was so delightfully cozy that I can not think of it without regret."

"I prophesied all this, you recollect; but you would not listen to me, and needs must bring about a rupture between the count and his wife by defying the latter in her own house."

"Oh, I don't repent of that; but I am sorry that I have tied up all my ready money in a great house like this; and when I think of the bill my upholsterer will bring in, I can not help shuddering."

"It is very unfortunate for you, and for George, too, that you have fallen into the very agreeable habit of living as if you had an income of one hundred thousand francs."

"George and I together have as much as that."

"You think so, do you?" said Moulieres, with an ironical smile.

"I am sure of it. I, for my part, have a million francs."



"Six hundred thousand of which are invested in a house which not only brings you in nothing, as you live in it, but which it costs you a great deal to keep up."

"That is true. Ah, well! I can sell it."

"Yes; at a loss."

"The fact is, I would have displayed much more good sense, had I remained where I was. But regrets will avail nothing, now. Besides, it does not matter much, as George has plenty of money, for I am in love with George, and I shall marry him whatever you may say to the contrary."

"Then you will have to begin by killing his wife, for if you are counting upon the vote of the Senate, you will have to wait a long time. By the way, would you like to know George's real financial condition?"

"You are going to try to convince me that he is a ruined man, but it will only be a waste of time, for I know that he has plenty of ready money."

"He won twenty-five thousand francs at baccarat yesterday. To-day he will perhaps lose forty thousand. The Pole's luck is improving again, and as he is much richer than Listrac, he will finally ruin him. Listrac had a handsome fortune when I first introduced him to you, but the late crash crippled him seriously, and it was his wife who set him on his feet again last January, or rather it was you, for it was done with your money. The entire amount you paid to her notary was spent in that way. Listrac has nothing, I tell you. He is living upon what he wins at the card-table. When that resource fails him, he will look to you for aid, his wife having deserted him. It will be for you to decide whether you will render him the desired assistance or not."

"Never!" exclaimed the baroness, vehemently. "I love George better than I ever loved any one in my whole life; but I am not one of that large class of love-sick simpletons to which Clara Monti belonged."

"I hope not, indeed."

"But I can not break my engagement with George on the plea that he has not money enough. What would you advise me to do?"

"To await the progress of events, and abandon your foolish hopes. Listrac will not succeed in obtaining a complete divorce. A partial divorce will be all that he can secure; and that will preclude any possibility of a second marriage, while his wife lives. If I should prove to be mistaken in this, I will furnish you with a good excuse for breaking your engagement with him whenever you wish."

"You are certainly very kind," said the baroness, half amused, half annoyed. "Do you know that you have a very singular way of showing your friendship?"

"Possibly," replied Moulieres, tranquilly; "but it is certainly a very sensible way, after all. We are sufficiently well acquainted, you and I, for me not to feign sentiments that I do not feel. I don't pride myself on my disinterestedness, and I view life as it really is. I am Listrac's comrade, but not his friend, in the sentimental sense of the word. Friendship is based only upon a unity of interests. It matters very little to me whether this gentleman turns out badly or



not; but it does matter a great deal to me, if you should be obliged to bear the penalty of his folly."

"Then you and I must have common interests, as you espouse my cause so warmly," remarked Juliette, with a searching glance.

"Unquestionably. I have often told you why."

"You have always told me that you and I would marry some day, but I do not agree with you."

"You will change your opinion by and by. However, that is neither here nor there. I only ask now that you will be guided by my counsels. When you have no further need of them, that is to say, when Listrac has disappeared from the scene, you can do as you please. Moreover, I am working for you now, though you do not suspect it. Do you know what I propose to do?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"Well, I am going to obtain some information in regard to Madame de Listrac's present mode of life. I want to find out if she really has a lover, as some people pretend."

"I hope she has, for in that case, George would have no difficulty in getting a divorce from her."

"Perhaps not; but she has the means of defending herself if he attempts to attack her. He is very well aware of the fact, and will not run any risk."

"Why not?" asked the baroness, eagerly.

"That is merely my opinion," replied Moulieres, evasively, for he did not care to reveal his business relations with Menager.

He took leave of the baroness shortly afterward, and started off on the errand to which he had alluded. For some time he had been anxious to know exactly what had become of Mme. de Listrac, for the information he had obtained on the subject had been extremely vague, and it had occurred to him that the Marquise de Marjevols might be much better informed than Listrac himself, who had made no effort to find his wife.

He found the marquise shivering in front of the fire, and grumbling because her wood would not burn.

"What! is this you?" she cried, as soon as he was ushered into the room. "This is a treat, indeed. It is very evident that you affect my handsome Cousin Listrac's society, for you have forgotten all the manners you ever knew. He has not condescended to come here since his wife left him, and you have thought it proper to follow his example. You were waiting for me to send for you, perhaps."

"I have done wrong, I know, madame," replied Moulieres, deferentially. "My only excuse is that I dared not present myself here after what had occurred. I knew that you would question me in regard to the causes of a rupture that I deeply deplore, and I did not know what to say to you."

"I know the causes far better than you do. The first is the ar-rant folly of which George was guilty in marrying a singer. When one is a Listrac, one should not lower one's self to gratify a mere caprice.

"The second is the atrocious conduct of an idiot, who, after five years of happy married life, falls heels over head in love with an adventuress, and ruins himself in stock-gambling.



"I do not pity him in the least. He has got only what he deserves, and if he is counting upon my property to set him on his feet again, he is reckoning without his host. In the first place, I shall outlive him; for if he goes on at his present rate, he will blow his brains out, one of these fine days. Besides, I am going to invest all my property in an annuity."

"I do not think that the idea of inheriting your property has ever occurred to Listrac, my dear madame. Besides, he has plenty left to live upon."

"Bah! he has nothing left. He depends upon what he wins at the card-table for his support. I tell you that he is in a fair way to dishonor his name."

"No one can accuse him of not paying his debts. He has paid every cent he owes, and I know very few who can say as much."

"How absurd it is for you to try to fill my ears with such nonsense as this! As if I did not know that his wife sold her house to help him out of his difficulties. She really acted nobly, and I must admit that she has shown much more principle than George."

"You judge her very leniently; but you must admit that she did very wrong to sever her conjugal relations so hastily, and if what I hear is true—"

"You refer to the report that she has a lover, I presume. That story is false, I can assure you of that."

"Do you know what has become of her?"

"I do. She has shown me much more respect than her scapegrace of a husband has. In short, she called to see me a few days ago, and told me all."

"All!" exclaimed Moulieres, thinking of the forged notes.

"Yes, all—the audacious visit of that hussy of a baroness, George's falsehoods and the deception he practiced to induce her to pay his debts. Is there anything still more outrageous? It would not surprise me."

"No, madame; and a part of what you have just told me is certainly news to me."

"Indeed? Well, to tell the truth, I think Clara Monti did perfectly right in leaving her husband, though I do not approve of her course since the separation. I advised her to return to her native land, where she could live very comfortably upon the money she has left; but she is unwilling to leave Paris, and I am inclined to think that she still loves her husband. Women like her always love scapegraces."

"But where is she living?"

"Not far from here, in furnished rooms on the Quai Voltaire. She has with her a young Italian girl, who arrived in Paris just in time to serve as a companion for her."

"That is singular. How old is this Mignon, who has so suddenly dropped down upon us from the land of the citron and orange?"

"Sixteen, she says, though she looks at least eighteen; but she is very beautiful."

"There are persons who will be uncharitable enough to believe that this girl is Madame de Listrac's daughter, born prior to her marriage."

"They will be fools, then, for the girl has a grandmother, resid-



ing in Florence, and her father was quite a celebrated man, an artist or poet—I don't exactly recollect which—named Vitellio."

"Vitellio!" exclaimed Moulieres. "Vitale Vitellio, who was assassinated one night on the Quai de l'Arno, just as he was leaving the theater?"

"You seem to be much better informed than I am. How did you learn these particulars? Were you in Florence at the time?"

"Yes; that is to say, no. I was traveling in Italy, and the murder caused a good deal of talk."

"I never heard anything about it. But why are you so agitated? It was not you who killed him, I hope," sneered the marquise.

Moulieres, who was usually so composed, had certainly changed countenance; but he quickly recovered himself, and said coldly:

"I never laid eyes on the man. But you are doubtless ignorant that he was Clara Monti's first lover. She had just made a very successful *début* at that time, and was about to marry Vitellio when he was assassinated in the street, probably by a rival."

"Whew!" murmured Mme. de Marvejols, "this is a tragedy my cousin by marriage did not think proper to relate to me."

"She did not keep it from her husband, however—she is very clever—but Listrac attached no importance to it."

"I do. When I see his wife again, I shall have a few words to say to her. I shall insist upon an explanation of her relations to her *protégée*, and shall certainly compel her to confide her plans to me. She let drop a few words the other day that led me to think that she meditated a return to the stage. I can not prevent her from doing that in some other country, but if she thinks of degrading herself in that way right here in Paris, she will have me to contend with."

"You need have no fears of that. A married woman can make no valid engagement without her husband's consent."

"Listrac will cheerfully give her that when his money is exhausted, provided she will share her earnings with him, and I believe she is just fool enough to consent to such an arrangement. But I swear to you that, in spite of my seventy years, I will take a box expressly to hiss her."

"There will be plenty of applause to drown your hisses, my dear madame," replied Moulieres. "She would be a great success. In the first place, her voice is unimpaired. Besides, the name she bears, will prove a powerful attraction. Everybody will want to see the Countess de Listrac personate 'Desdemona' or 'Ophelia.' I am not at all surprised that she has made up her mind to return to the stage, if only to get even with her husband. What will he think of this piece of revenge? I intend to ask him."

"Do so, by all means," retorted the marquise, dryly, "and when you speak to him on the subject, pray do not conceal my opinion. Tell him, from me, that if he permits such a thing, he will be irretrievably disgraced. He is badly enough compromised already, but he is still tolerated, while he will be cut by everybody if they have reason to believe that he lives by his wife's quavers, after reducing her to poverty."

"His position would certainly be very unenviable. If he follows my advice, he will oppose such a step on the part of the count-



ess, who will probably think twice before creating such a scandal. She is thirty-five years old, and her talent will not save her from criticisms to which every woman is keenly sensitive. Besides, what would she do with this young compatriot she has taken under her protection?"

"She would probably encourage her to enter upon the same career. She sings like a nightingale, I understand."

"In any case, it would be well to warn Listrac of this possibility. Why do you not speak to him yourself? I am sure he will call if I hint that you would like to see him."

"No. I don't want him to set foot in my house while he is compromising himself by such marked attentions to that Benserade woman. If he had applied to me when his wife left him, I would have done my best to bring about a reconciliation between them. He did not, but I was magnanimous enough to undertake his defense, for he is my cousin, after all; but I know very well which of them is to blame. Nothing that he can say, will change my opinion, so I do not care to listen to his explanation. It is too late. Let the matter rest where it is."

"But if he should cease his attentions to the baroness, what then?"

"Then we will see; but I don't think there is much chance of that."

"She may marry some one else."

"If Listrac would have nothing more to do with her, I am almost sure that his wife would be fool enough to return to him. In that case, they might go to the country to live, and I would give them my blessing before their departure."

"I do not doubt that this promise will induce Listrac to make a complete change in his mode of life," replied Moulières, with an ironical smile.

"I do; but you can add that my money is not yet invested in an annuity, nor my will made," retorted the marquise.

"I will not fail to do so; but I must now ask your permission to take leave of you. I ought to see George at once, and this is just the hour to catch him at the club."

"Seated at the card-table. Tell him I hope he will lose more than he can pay. That must happen some day or other, and I wish it would happen to-day. Ferocious animals can be tamed only by depriving them of nourishment. Starvation makes them more amenable to reason, and I shall perhaps succeed in getting him back in the right path when he is reduced to want."

"The baroness, too, is not likely to regard him with much favor if he becomes poor."

"You know the lady very well, it seems to me."

"I am so well acquainted with Listrac that I could hardly help knowing her, but I assure you that I do not sustain her. I espouse the good cause, that of the wife."

"I am glad to hear it," said the marquise, though the words were uttered with a rather incredulous air. "Go and talk to my cousin, if it is not too late. I fear that he is already compromised irretrievably, however."

Moulières, who prided himself on his good manners, gallantly



kissed the hand the dowager extended, and departed, well satisfied with his visit.

He had learned many things of which he had been entirely ignorant, and which he intended to turn to a good account.

The most important and least expected of these pieces of information was certainly the news of the existence of a child of Vitale Vitellio, and the protection accorded this child by Mme. de Listrac.

Notwithstanding what he had said to Mme. de Marvejols, he had known the father in Florence, and had good reason to remember his tragic death—a reason which he would not have confided to his best friend. But he was troubling himself much less about the past than the present, however, being engrossed in discovering what advantage, if any, he could derive from Clara Monti's actual situation.

He reached the club a little before the hour at which the card-playing usually began, so being in no haste to enter the baccarat-room, he stepped into the reading-room, and to his great astonishment found a very animated conversation going on there, to the great displeasure of the parties engaged in reading. Two or three papers were passing from hand to hand, and excited comments were being freely exchanged.

Moulières at first thought that some great political crisis must be impending, but a name that he overheard, attracted his attention, and he approached the talkers.

"It is a mere *canard*," said one; "journalists nowadays are always indulging in such tricks to create a sensation."

"No, that is hardly probable," replied another. "The names are given in full, and when persons so well known are involved, no one would venture to circulate such a report unless there was some foundation for it."

"Hello! here comes Moulières, just in time to decide the question. He must know," exclaimed another.

"What is it, pray?" inquired George's friend.

"Read this, my dear fellow," replied the first speaker, handing him a paper.

Moulières took the sheet and read the following paragraph:

"We are pleased to be among the first to announce what promises to be the great dramatic event of the present year. For three weeks, the company of the Théâtre-Lyrique have been rehearsing Gounod's 'Romeo and Juliet;' but the manager alone knew the name of the illustrious artiste who was to assume the role of 'Juliet.' We are now authorized to lift the veil of mystery in which a noble and charming woman has enveloped herself—a woman who, after long shining with incomparable brilliancy on the operatic stage, has decided to return to it for reasons which require no explanation.

"The great and peerless Clara Monti, whose triumphs all the other capitals of Europe have witnessed, is about to sing in Paris for the first time. This will be the crowning of her artistic career, and the climax of her fame, for a rest of several years has only matured her wonderful talent. Those who have heard her in foreign lands will crowd to hear her again, and those who have known her socially, in the exalted sphere she has so nobly adorned, will gladly contribute to the success that awaits her, for they will feel it a duty



to manifest the sympathy her undeserved misfortunes have awakened in their hearts."

"What do you say to that?" asked one of the club men, when the perusal was ended.

"What do you expect me to say?" retorted Moulieres. "A cantatrice becomes tired of the stage, and leaves it; she begins to pine for it again, and so returns to it. I see nothing very astonishing about that."

"Then you think this rumor is not a *canard*?"

"I know nothing at all about it."

"Nonsense! you are sufficiently intimate with Listrac to know what to think about it. It is true that he does not live with his wife; but I presume he is not ignorant of her movements."

"Possibly not, but that is no reason why he should confide them to me. I certainly have not the slightest desire to question him on the subject. His domestic affairs do not interest me."

"Others will be less considerate, I fancy; and he will be obliged to answer them. He will find himself in a very delicate position, and will feel the necessity of explaining. While it was merely a case of incompatibility of temper, or a misunderstanding between husband and wife, the affair was nobody's business, and it mattered very little who was to blame. But Listrac now appears as the husband of an actress who will make enormous sums of money. He will certainly be accused of speculating on his wife—and he will be in honor bound to vindicate himself."

"And why? They have separated. She has not consulted him, and I don't see how he can prevent her from singing."

"He can refuse her permission to sign any contract."

"That is a legal question I know nothing at all about."

"It is one that was long since settled, however."

"If I were in his place, I should feel afraid of being asked to conjugate the verb 'to sing,'" added a sharp-tongued gentleman. "Thou singest, she sings, I cause to sing—"

"Why don't you say as much to Listrac?" interrupted Moulieres.

"Why should I? I am not an intimate friend of his," retorted the gentleman. "It is surely no duty of mine to enlighten him in regard to the annoyances which his new position as the husband of a star may bring down upon him. If you feel so inclined, you can have no better opportunity than the present, for he is now at the card-table in the baccarat-room. They began playing before four o'clock this afternoon. It is the decisive battle, and large as Clara Monti's salary at the Théâtre-Lyrique may be, Listrac may lose here this evening more than she can earn in a year."

This conversation dismayed Moulieres, not that he was troubled by the insinuations against his friend, for he knew that gentleman's worth, and did not feel inclined to shiver any lances in his defense; but he saw that the count would now be forced by public opinion into making an immediate decision.

Greatly annoyed and perplexed, he resolved to put an end to this conversation with the least possible delay.

"You are, of course, at liberty to constitute yourself a jury for the trial of Listrac, gentlemen," said he, "but you must allow me



to excuse myself. I never meddle with other people's affairs; and I must say that I think my example worthy of imitation."

With this retort, he turned upon his heel, and directed his steps toward the room in which his friend was playing.

On entering it, Moulieres was surprised to see that the Pole was no longer keeping the bank, and that his place was now occupied by the count, who sat enthroned in the center of the table, which was surrounded, as usual, by a triple row of players and lookers-on.

This change seemed to indicate that the foreigner, not having money enough left to keep the bank, had accepted a more modest rôle, and was now striving to retrieve his losses by timid attacks upon his successful antagonist.

But another glance satisfied Moulieres that matters were not going on exactly as he had supposed.

Listrac's countenance was not the same he had worn on his successful days. Though outwardly calm, his lips were compressed, and in dealing the cards his movements were nervous and hurried. The Pole, utterly unmoved, was smoking a huge cigar which had not gone out, as it usually did when he was losing heavily.

Besides, there was a large pile of chips in front of him; while before Listrac, on the contrary, there were only some slips of paper bearing figures written by his own hand, and his signature—a bad sign at a club where such a substitute for money is rarely allowed.

Moulieres could hardly believe his eyes. Listrac had been winning, not only steadily, but heavily, all the past month, and it seemed impossible that he had nothing left. Nevertheless, such reverses not unfrequently happen when the stakes are heavy, and Mme. de Benserade's adviser, being anxious to learn the truth, turned and questioned one of his neighbors—a man who had stopped playing himself after losing a goodly portion of his property at the card-table—but who enjoyed seeing others play, as a sailor who has reached the harbor in safety, enjoys watching the vessels that are contending with adverse winds in their efforts to enter port.

"Your friend is having an extraordinary run of bad luck, my dear fellow," he replied. "He began the game by committing an act of unpardonable folly. The Pole declared that he would act as banker no longer, and as he is a shrewd rascal, I suspect that this announcement was made in the hope of inducing Listrac to take his place, and thus effect a change in the remarkable run of good luck your friend had been enjoying. He was not mistaken, for as a better against the bank the Pole is invariably successful. The game has been in progress barely an hour, and he has already won at least three hundred thousand francs from Listrac.

"And look, the Pole has just won two thousand louis more. If the count does not stop, he will be a ruined man. You had better pull him by the sleeve, and give him a word of warning."

"It is not necessary," replied Moulieres, "he has thrown down his cards."

Listrac had, in fact, thrown aside the rest of the cards.

"I have had enough of it," he remarked, as he handed the Pole an I.O.U. "Will you take the bank, sir?"

"Willingly," was the cold response, "but I shall accept as stakes only gold, bank-notes, or chips."



The count turned pale with anger, but instead of resenting the insult, which could have been intended only for him, replied:

"Very well, then, we will stop playing for to-day. To-morrow you will be paid, and I shall then ask you to give me my revenge."

"Whenever you please, count."

This dry and rather ironical response terminated the conversation between the victor and the vanquished, and Listrac left the table.

Moulieres lost no time in joining him. His mind was now made up.

"Ah! here you are," remarked Listrac. "I am glad of it, for I was just leaving, and I am anxious to have a word with you."

"I, too, have something to say to you, my dear fellow; but don't let us remain here. There are too many watching us. Let us step into the next room. We shall be alone there."

They did, and found it unoccupied.

"I have just met with a severe defeat, old fellow," began George, "but I am sure to retrieve my losses, and I shall have the Pole's last louis yet. But I have gone too far, I need forty thousand francs with which to pay my debts, and begin again to-morrow. Menager will loan me the money, of course. Do you think I would be likely to find him at home now?"

"I think not; and even if you did, you would have only your labor for your pains," replied Moulieres.

"And why? The last notes I gave him have been paid."

"By your wife; but if you should draw upon her now, I doubt if she would honor your signature."

"Mine is as good as hers."

"Not in the opinion of Menager, for you recollect that he required her indorsement the first time, and now he would not be satisfied with that, perhaps, for you know even better than I do, that Madame de Listrac devoted the money derived from the sale of her house to paying your indebtedness to your broker."

"And consequently I have no intention of applying to her. After what she has done, all is over between us. I hear, too, that she has a lover."

"I think that is a mistake; but that is not the question. You need money, and must have it immediately. I can not loan it to you, for all my money is tied up just now, and I can not see where you are going to procure the necessary amount."

"If worst comes to worst I shall have to apply to Juliette," said Listrac, with a furtive glance at his friend.

"That would do no good," replied Moulieres, coldly. "I saw her only this morning, and she told me that she was greatly embarrassed financially. You see she had to take six hundred thousand francs of her capital to pay for the house she purchased."

"In spite of me. I did everything in my power to prevent her from doing it."

"And you were perfectly right; but the baroness has a very strong will of her own, as we both know. She has had to pay dearly for her obstinacy, and she still owes for the furniture she bought to replace that of Madame de Listrac. By the way, she told me to ask you to take a box at some theater this evening, as she felt like going to the play."



"I certainly am not in the humor for it. If I can't raise this money in forty-eight hours, I shall be expelled from the club, and after that—"

"I know a way to get you out of your dilemma, but I scarcely dare to suggest it to you."

"Speak!" cried Listrac. "There are times when one would be willing to apply to the devil himself to obtain money, and this is one of them."

"Then I will run the risk," replied Moulières. "Are you aware that Madame de Listrac contemplates a return to the stage?"

"Impossible! She would not dare!"

"You are very much mistaken. She does dare. She is soon to appear at the Théâtre-Lyrique."

"Who told you so?"

"I saw it in the papers."

"I read them this morning, but saw nothing of this report."

"You omitted the dramatic news of the day, probably. Just now, in the reading-room, I was shown a paragraph announcing the speedy *début* of the countess."

"Ah! this is really too much! My wife has no right to enter into any contract without my consent, and I shall take means to prevent her from thus dishonoring my name."

"I have strong doubts of your success if you do. You may have the law on your side; but managers do not hesitate to transgress the law when it is to their interest to do so, and the *impresario* who will introduce the famous Clara Monti to the Parisian public will certainly make an immense amount of money. You can bring suit against him, of course, but I am by no means sure that you will win it."

"I don't see how I can lose it."

"Madame de Listrac—excuse my frankness—can truthfully allege that you have impoverished her, or at least that she has sacrificed three quarters of her fortune to pay the debts you contracted in your unfortunate stock speculations, and she will therefore insist that you have no right to prevent her from earning a living by her talent. She will have public opinion on her side, and that goes a good way with the judges. In fact, I should not be surprised if the case did not go into the courts at all, but be decided by a referee, and in Madame de Listrac's favor. There are numerous precedents for this, for the presiding judges of courts are always favorably disposed toward a woman, especially when this woman is a great artiste."

The count's head drooped under this torrent of arguments whose weight he could not deny, though he was unwilling to admit himself worsted.

"I say nothing of the frightful scandal which would be the inevitable consequence of this public altercation," continued Moulières. "The press and the clubs would certainly gloat over this choice morsel. There is already not a little feeling against you, and this will be increased when certain facts which have not yet been made public are revealed. Mme. de Listrac has kindly consented to keep the cause of the separation a secret, but if she is obliged to defend herself she will no longer maintain silence."



The count shuddered. He understood the allusion perfectly.

"Then there is nothing left for me but to blow my brains out," he said sullenly. "If that is the means you hesitate to suggest to me—"

"You forget that I am your friend. Your situation is deplorable, but it is not desperate. Will you listen to a few words of advice?"

"That is what I have been waiting for a quarter of an hour."

"Well, there are two ways in which you can get yourself out of this scrape. You need money. How much do you need?"

"I need one hundred thousand francs to pay my debts and secure my revenge."

"Why don't you ask your wife for the money?"

"You must be mad."

"Not at all. Madame de Listrac is anxious to resume the artistic career by which she gained all she possesses, or rather all she did possess—and I am satisfied that she would pay handsomely for your permission to make any contracts she chooses, now or hereafter, either in Paris or elsewhere."

"Then you would advise me to sell her my consent?"

"Most assuredly."

"And only a moment ago you pretended that she could do perfectly well without it. You even added that she had several very formidable weapons against me."

"I do think so; but she perhaps feels a very natural repugnance to making use of them. It is even possible that she would prefer to make a pecuniary sacrifice rather than do it. In any case, it is a step worth trying, and if you decide upon it, I assure you that no one shall know it, not even Madame de Benserade, for I will keep your secret for you."

"But my wife will not, and even supposing that she would consent, a pretty figure I should cut in the world as the husband of a singer whom any blackguard can hiss, and whose conduct I have no right to criticise. I am not inclined to fill such a rôle."

"You might fill a worse one," said Moulieres, with a meaning that the count comprehended perfectly. "Besides, I suggested this only as a last resort. There is a much better means, I think."

"And what is that?"

"To obtain by persuasion what we just spoke of obtaining by threats."

"I do not understand you."

"Are you determined to remain upon your present footing with Madame de Benserade, or would you consent to give her up? She can not marry you, as you are already married, and there is very little chance of your obtaining anything more than a partial divorce. That being the case, why do you not seek a reconciliation with your wife?"

"You do not know her."

"I know her better than you think. The countess has been deeply wounded by your conduct, and it is out of spite that she has decided to return to the stage; but she loves you still."

"Dartige is always with her, I am told."



"People exaggerate outrageously, and you know that she never cared for him."

"She may have learned to love him since she left me."

"Your relative, the Marquise de Marvejols, is ready to convince you to the contrary."

"You have seen her?"

"This very day. I wished to learn what had become of Madame de Listrac, and I now know all that I could reasonably desire to know on the subject. The countess called on your cousin, who has not only returned the visit, but warmly espoused her cause. She is, in fact, highly incensed with you, and yet she is indignant at the idea of the Countess de Listrac appearing on the stage. If that should really happen, she would turn against her, and she depends upon you to prevent it."

"But how?"

"She did not say, but allows you to decide; and she bade me say to you that she would forgive you only upon that condition. She even added that if you refused to do what she desired, she would sink her entire fortune in an annuity, so you would inherit nothing at her death."

"Very well; but you are of the opinion that my wife would not yield to intimidation. How the deuce am I to make my peace with her? I do not even know where she is."

"She is living in furnished rooms on the Quai Voltaire."

"And you think she would allow me to call on her?"

"No; but if I were in your place, I should have no difficulty in obtaining an interview with her."

"How would you manage it?"

"In the simplest possible fashion. The countess rehearses every day at the Théâtre-Lyrique. I should ask the door-keeper the hour at which these rehearsals take place, and wait for Madame de Listrac at the door."

"And have an explanation in the street? That would be both ridiculous and absurd."

"On the contrary, it would be an excellent opportunity to obtain an interview with the countess, who would certainly refuse to see you if you should present yourself at her house. She may refuse to listen to you at first, but you know how to appease a woman's wrath much better than I do—especially when this woman loves you."

"And you imagine that a few honeyed words will suffice to make her forget the past, to renounce the stage, and return to live with me. You are strangely deceived. Clara has an iron will, and when she has once made a resolve, nothing can change it. She bore with me patiently a long time, but now all is over. She wrote me that she would never see me again; she will keep her word; and if she has taken it into her head to return to the stage, nothing in the world can deter her."

"I will make a bet on it, if you like."

"A bet."

"Yes. I will wager you a piece of bric-à-brac, or of jewelry, to be given to Madame de Benserade by the loser, that if you do your best, the countess will consent to do what you ask."



"She will at least make some conditions," murmured Listrac only half convinced.

"You may have to wait," interrupted Moulières, "and I advise you to submit. Make some concessions, too, my dear fellow. It is well worth your while, and even if you should be obliged to resume the conjugal yoke, I shall not pity you much."

"You make very light of it; but to submit to the demands of an incensed woman, to beg for the assistance she will make me pay dearly for, if she consents to grant it at all, is certainly not very pleasant."

"It is certainly more agreeable than expulsion from the club, and—poverty."

"I am not reduced to that yet."

"I hope not, my friend; but you are burdened by a heavy debt of honor, and you have neither the money nor the credit to enable you to meet it. Where can you obtain the necessary amount within the next twenty-four hours?"

"Juliette would not refuse to loan it to me, if I should ask her."

"I should advise you not to attempt it. The baroness is very much in love with you, but she is not as tender-hearted as Madame de Listrac. Any feeling of self-sacrifice is a stranger to her, and nothing would induce her to impoverish herself for your sake. Besides, as I told you a moment ago, she has no ready money at her disposal."

"You need not be alarmed. I shall not expose myself to any danger of a refusal."

"And you are quite right. It would be a thousand times better for you to negotiate with Madame de Listrac. If she will not forgive you and become reconciled to you, promise her that you will never offer any opposition to her going on the stage, if she will pay you one hundred thousand francs."

"I will think about it," replied Listrac, shaking his head dubiously.

Then, bidding his friend a hasty good-evening, he left the club-house and went home to review his embarrassing situation in solitude.

## CHAPTER VI.

IN the meantime, Clara Monti had undergone a most cruel ordeal, and had bitterly expiated her generous weakness.

On leaving her home on the Rue de Monceau forever, she went straight to the modest inn, at which Andrea Vitellio was staying. It was only necessary to mention her name for the girl to give her Cesare Quaglia's letter of introduction, and throw herself into Clara's arms, as if she had indeed found a mother in her.

They instantly conceived a strong affection for each other, and Mme. de Listrac had not hesitated a second to propose that Andrea should live with her any more than Andrea hesitated to accept the offer without giving any explanation of her protectress.

Clara intended to tell her *protégée* the sad story of her separation from her husband afterward, and also her plans for the future; but what she desired at once was a companion, a friend who



would divert her mind from her troubles, and also serve as a protection against slanderous tongues.

That same evening the pair found themselves comfortably established in a handsome suite of apartments whose windows looked out upon the Quai Voltaire, and the countess entered upon the new life which her young companion strove to make as pleasant as possible.

The first few days were engrossed by business matters, particularly by conferences with M. Jouin who now blamed himself greatly for having concluded the sale without obtaining more information in regard to the purchaser, and who gave Clara a good deal of advice which she refused to follow, however. The shrewd notary, on learning the facts of the case, was of the opinion that the Countess de Listrac ought to keep her money, and immediately institute a suit for divorce. This she absolutely refused to do. On the contrary, she had faithfully fulfilled her promise to pay her unworthy husband's indebtedness to his broker, and had even abandoned all idea of seeking a legal separation from the count, feeling that he no longer had any authority over her; and that even if he had, he would not have the audacity to assert it.

Clara's sole aim now was to keep the whole unfortunate affair as quiet as possible, and M. Jouin had promised her that he would say nothing at all about the matter, and that he would neither reveal her whereabouts nor movements to any inquiring friends.

The notary had also taken upon himself the task of disposing of the household furniture, dismissing the servants and paying them the wages due them. Clara had no desire to keep anything that would remind her of the past.

As soon as these business matters had been satisfactorily adjusted, Clara called upon the Marquise de Marvejols to apprise her of the real facts of the case, and to announce her intentions, which were at that time to leave France, never to return.

The dowager received her rather coldly, but before the conclusion of the interview, she was obliged to acknowledge that her cousin Listrac was the one to blame in the matter, and not only to promise to defend the countess if attacked, but also to keep her present retreat and plans for departure a profound secret.

Clara made no attempt to conceal the act that she intended to receive the friendly visits of M. Albert Dartige, and to avail herself of his proffered services whenever necessity required; and Mme. de Marvejols, who knew that Dartige was an honorable man, and Mme. de Listrac a virtuous woman, had made no protest, and sustained her cousin by marriage, in this decision, by declaring that Listrac deserved his fate, and by visiting Clara quite frequently, though she said nothing to any one about it.

Dartige called even more frequently upon the countess, who felt obliged to welcome him cordially after all he had done for her, especially as he never overstepped the bounds of respectful friendship; and though it might have cost him quite an effort not to transgress those limits at first, he had met with an entire change in that respect, and Andrea had certainly been an important factor in his conversion.

He continued to serve Mme. de Listrac's interests with a prudence



and delicacy for which she was profoundly grateful; and he had not only abandoned all idea of challenging the count, but had given up going to the club for fear of meeting M. de Listrac there. And though Chantal, who has not the same reasons for holding himself aloof, kept him fully informed of all that was going on, he sedulously refrained from wounding Clara by telling her of the count's follies and the gossip now everywhere rife in regard to him and Mme. de Benserade.

The existence Clara Monti was now leading could be only provisional. Her fortune, though greatly impaired, enabled her to have some other home than a hotel, and to choose the place of her permanent residence.

Besides, she must think of Andrea.

She had resolved never to leave her, and this was very natural, for she now had no other aim in life than to insure a happy future for this young girl who reminded her of the only object of her affections who had not deceived her. And what was this future to be? The girl dreamed only of dramatic fame, and Clara was satisfied that her *protégée* possessed all the attributes that make up a great artiste. She was a true musician in soul, and her old instructor had not said too much in praise of her voice; but Clara Monti knew by experience the cost of such triumphs, and to what these brilliant successes not unfrequently lead; so she had done her best to dissuade her young companion from a career which is even more dangerous than it is brilliant.

She had not succeeded, however, for the enthusiastic girl of seventeen not only entreated Mme. de Listrac to secure the long-coveted opportunity to make her *début*, but was constantly urging her protectress to return to the stage.

Nothing could have been further from Clara's thoughts when she left her husband; but a little later, the idea that her art might lessen her grief and disappointment did occur to her. She had tried to forget, but in vain. Her husband's face was ever before her. What good would it do for her to take refuge in Russia, or to cross the Atlantic? It would be better for her to remain in Paris. There, she would at least have the salutary spectacle of her husband's dissolute life ever before her eyes, and she could perhaps gain strength from it to resist the weakness she dreaded.

But how should she employ herself in Paris, if she decided not to leave it? There was nothing to prevent her from resuming her old place in society. Public opinion, when fully informed of the situation, must turn in her favor; and the society in which she had moved would not close its doors against the Countess de Listrac when the truth became known. She would be received everywhere; people would visit her, she would be petted and made much of, and the count's unworthiness would be proclaimed from the housetops.

But, after all, what would she gain by it? This revulsion of feeling would not restore her lost happiness. She had learned the hollowness of earthly friendship; and now thought with regret of the days when art and independence had contented her. Operatic life had given her fame, wealth, and absolute freedom. Why should she not resume it? Why should she not drop the title of countess,



and once more become Clara Monti, the idolized prima-donna, the greatest lyric artiste of modern times?

Her hesitation was due principally to a want of confidence in herself, and an unwillingness to risk a trial which might prove unsuccessful. She had not sung in public for five years, and she feared that her voice had lost some of its marvelous power and sweetness.

While still in a state of indecision, she received a very unexpected visit from a manager who had just inaugurated a new theatrical enterprise, and who was seeking some great attraction.

All Paris, of course, knew that the celebrated Clara Monti had left her husband; but this *impresario* had, nevertheless, had not a little trouble in discovering her address. He came to offer her an engagement on the most favorable terms: Thirty performances, at five thousand francs an evening, with a promise of a renewal on the same terms the ensuing autumn, the spring season having barely two months to run.

Mme. de Listrac replied, merely for form's sake, that her husband might oppose her return to the stage; but the manager declared his entire willingness to dispense with the count's consent, and to assume the whole responsibility of such a step.

Clara then asked to be heard by competent judges, and this sort of private rehearsal had been a complete triumph, for her voice, strengthened by a long rest, was of greater range and more powerful than ever.

It was now necessary to accept or refuse without further delay the offers of this manager, who wished to open his place of amusement by the middle of March, in order to take advantage of the brief time that remained before the arrival of the dull season; and Clara decided to accept, on condition that her name should not be announced until a few days before the first performance.

She had very naturally chosen for her first appearance before a Parisian audience the opera in which she had achieved her most brilliant triumphs in former years, "Romeo and Juliet," and in the troupe organized by the new manager there were distinguished vocalists, fully competent to interpret Gounod's masterpiece.

At first, Andrea had manifested a strong desire to also make her *début* in the rôle of Stefano on the same evening; but the countess had more than one reason for wishing her *protégée* to wait. Clara had noticed for some time that her faithful ally, Dartige, was not regarded with indifference by Andrea. He dared not encourage this growing love on the part of her *protégée*, for she did not suppose that Dartige would think for a moment of marrying a girl destitute alike of influential connections, wealth, and expectations; but feeling that he would be even less likely to marry such a person if she had been upon the stage, Clara was unwilling that Andrea should deprive herself of her only chance of making such an eminently desirable marriage.

Andrea yielded, and even submitted uncomplainingly to the edict that forbade her to cross the threshold of the Théâtre-Lyrique. The countess, however, promised to take her there on the opening night, in order that she might witness the triumph of her protectress; but until that eventful day arrived, she would allow Andrea to accompany her only as far as the door when she went to rehearsal, for it



would be like pouring oil upon fire to bring one who longed for the stage as the children of Israel longed for the promised land, in contact with the enthusiastic artists of which this operatic troupe was composed.

Andrea, who rarely left their rooms on the Quai Voltaire, found this daily walk very beneficial. At her age one needs air, excitement, and even diversion. She knew very little about Paris, but these promenades gave her an opportunity to see some portions of the great city. Not the most frequented, nor the most fashionable, by any means, for the young Italian was rather shy, and shunned the crowd; so, instead of directing her steps toward the main boulevards, she spent her hours of solitude in wandering about the gloomy quays of the *cité*, and of the Ile Saint Louis, sometimes prolonging her walk as far as the Jardin des Plantes, and returning by way of the Arsenal, to wait at the entrance of the theater for Mme. de Listrac. She went fearlessly about a city where young girls who venture out alone are oftentimes subjected to annoyance and even insult. She was quite able to defend herself; besides, no one ever troubled her. Her rather severe beauty was not of the type that attracts the attention of fashionable loungers. An artist might have stopped to admire her, the ordinary passer-by scarcely honored her with a glance.

What subject engrossed her mind during these long but aimless excursions? The countess thought she could guess, for her *protégée* evinced much less ardor for the theater. She talked very little now about her *début*, but she did have a great deal to say about Albert Dartige. She had inquired about the position he occupied in the world, and the information given by Mme. de Listrac seemed to have a depressing effect upon her spirits. It is probable that she realized the width of the social gulf that separated her from a secretary of legation, and she evidently tried hard to conceal the interest he had inspired in her heart.

Dartige's manner toward her was perfect. He was deferential, affectionate, almost tender; and yet, not a word that could be construed into a declaration of love had ever escaped him.

The rehearsals were now drawing to a close, and the first performance of "Romeo and Juliet" was advertised for the fourteenth of March. Clara Monti had only a week longer to wait for the verdict of the Parisian public, which, as yet, knew her only by reputation.

She did not fear this verdict, but she did ask herself with not a little uneasiness what effect the announcement would produce. The Countess de Listrac seemed to be well-nigh forgotten now; even her husband appeared to have forgotten her. Would this announcement recall the attention of the public to her private life? And in that case would the count remain silent, or would he interfere at this most inopportune moment?

However this might be, the die was cast. It was too late for Mme. de Listrac to recoil now, nor did she contemplate such a step.

On the day following the victory of the Polish banker—who had not yet received his winnings, however—the wife of his victim repaired to the theater, as usual, in company with Andrea; and as she parted from the girl at the door, she requested her not to go far that day, as the rehearsal was not likely to be as long as usual.



"You will have to deny yourself the pleasure of exploring all the islands of the Seine to day," she remarked, gayly. "There will be no rehearsal on Sunday, and to make amends for your disappointment, I will take you around the lakes of the Bois de Boulogne. Walk about a little, or take a seat on one of the benches in the square yonder, and I will rejoin you in an hour, or perhaps less."

"Are you never going to allow me to enter there, godmother?" asked Andrea, pointing to the Théâtre-Lyrique.

It was Mme. de Listrac who had suggested that her *protégée* should call her godmother. Madame would be too ceremonious: "Mother" might cause unpleasant comment.

"I thought you had abandoned that project."

"I am less anxious, perhaps; but—"

"You have not given it up entirely. Ah, well, we will see in a year—if you are not married."

"Married! Who would have me? I am a mere nobody, and I have nothing."

"You are my adopted daughter, and I shall leave you all I possess at my death."

"Do not talk of dying, I implore you, godmother. I could not live without you. You are all I have in the world."

"You forget your grandmother."

"She is old. I can not have her long."

"That is the very reason why you ought to marry."

"I am very happy as I am."

This response reminded Mme. de Listrac that marriage had not brought her happiness, and the recollection made her bring the conversation to a hasty termination.

Andrea watched her until she disappeared from sight through the door reserved for the performers, and then walked thoughtfully toward the square where the countess had promised to meet her, and seated herself in a spot where she could see Mme. de Listrac as soon as she left the theater.

She had an hour to spend there, and as she had brought no book or work with her, she could only reflect on her present situation.

She had dreamed of becoming a great artiste, but her longings for dramatic success had given place to a new sentiment which she could not clearly define, as she had never experienced it before. She saw, now, that a woman's life needs something more than fame to render it complete, and she discovered that she possessed a heart. Did not the example of her protectress show her that life is nothing without love? Clara Monti, surfeited with success, had abandoned the stage, and thrown away her crown of laurels to replace it by a simple wreath of orange blossoms, and though she had now returned to the stage it was only to find consolation for cruel treachery and deceit. Consequently there must be joys which Vitale Vitellio's daughter had never known—joys which make one forget and brave everything, even the misery of being betrayed.

She was engrossed by thoughts like these when, to her great surprise, she saw Dartige rounding a turn in the path. Whom could he be seeking in this unfashionable square? Certainly not Andrea, as she had just entered it now for the first time. Mme. de Listrac, perhaps. Still, it seemed hardly probable that she had asked him



to escort her home after the rehearsal, for had she not requested Andrea to wait for her?

It soon became evident that he had come for the countess, however, for he glanced impatiently at the Théâtre-Lyrique, and drew out his watch to see what time it was.

He had passed the young girl without noticing her, and was now standing with his back toward her, but in a moment he turned, and began to look around him for a place to sit until Mme. de Listrac should make her appearance.

This movement brought him face to face with Andrea, who had not moved from her quiet corner.

"You here, mademoiselle!" he exclaimed, not forgetting to salute her with mingled deference and politeness.

"Yes," stammered Andrea, blushing hotly. "I accompanied my godmother to the theater, and she asked me to wait for her here until she was ready to return home."

"Then you will allow me to wait with you, perhaps. I must speak to Madame de Listrac as soon as possible, and as you are waiting for her—"

"You have no bad news for her, I trust."

"No, it is only something that I have just learned, and that I am anxious for her to know.

"But I am very glad to see you," he added, seating himself beside the girl. "I have never had the pleasure of being alone with you since our first meeting in the garden of the Tuileries.

"I have not forgotten that pleasant meeting," he continued, gently, "and many times since I have blessed the lucky chance that enabled me to serve you beyond my hopes."

"I, too, have blessed it," replied the girl, quickly. "What would have become of me if I had not found Madame de Listrac? It is to you that I am indebted for the happiness of being her *protégée* to day—"

"Say rather her adopted daughter. She has told me twenty times that she will never leave you—that the idea of a separation from you would be intolerable."

"I should die of grief if I were obliged to leave her."

"Then you have no intention of marrying?" inquired Dartige, smiling.

"I have no such intention now, and I never shall have," replied Andrea, promptly.

"Then you make a great mistake, mademoiselle, but you will change your mind by and by."

"I think not, and it seems to me that you, yourself—"

"I am a man. My early manhood was spent in vainly searching— You see, I wanted to marry a girl whom I could love, and who could love me in return. I did not find her—to my very great regret—"

"You have the wherewithal to console yourself: devoted friends, a congenial profession, a promising career—"

"A career I would like to abandon. I have no ambition, and I would gladly resign an embassy to win the wife for whom I long. But, unfortunately, I am too old. My ideal would not have me, I fear."



"Would you marry Madame de Listrac if she were a widow?" asked the young Italian, imprudently.

This unexpected question disconcerted Dartige. He could not help blushing, and it took him some time to reply:

"I would have married her years ago. I will not try to conceal that it depended only upon her. But she preferred Monsieur de Listrac."

"She has bitterly repented of it since."

"Possibly, but her feelings have not changed, while mine are no longer the same. You see, mademoiselle, that all strong protestations are unwise. For instance, in a few years you yourself will not feel as you do now."

"Nor will you, probably."

"I have passed the age of change. It is too late in life for me to waste my affection in that way."

"Ah, well, to make sure, I shall wait until I am thirty," said Andrea, thoughtfully.

"Then you have fourteen years more to remain single," replied Dartige, gayly. "You must consider yourself invulnerable. Or have you a heart of stone, that you can feel sure it will not throb before the date your prudence has appointed? I admire your strength of will and self-control, and wish I could say as much for mine. My heart is not in such good subjection; on the contrary, it has been my master ever since I came into the world, and I see no reason why I should ever cease to obey its dictates. If it bade me marry the poorest seamstress I should make no attempt to resist its mandate."

"A seamstress, perhaps—but how about an actress?"

"I should not hesitate in the least, for if she loved me she would renounce the stage."

"Then you would insist upon her renouncing it?"

"Yes, for I am satisfied that a woman can not serve two masters at the same time. Art is an exacting master. I should be very jealous of her art."

The girl started slightly, but made no reply.

"I should give the woman I loved a chance to choose," continued Dartige. "Madame de Listrac has proved that she thinks as I do. She sacrificed her art. If she returns to it to-day it is only because her husband has deserted her, and I cordially approve her decision, as she has only her art to console her."

"I have had no such unfortunate experience," said Andrea, naïvely, "but I do not understand why my godmother should be so bitterly opposed to my making my *début*."

"Probably because she thinks you would be much happier in making a love match."

"Yet hers turned out very badly."

"All men are not alike."

"Is the Count de Listrac a villain?"

"I can not tell you all I know in regard to the circumstances that alienated him from her, but I assure you that you have it in your power to make a better choice. You are not situated as Madame de Listrac was when she married. She was rich, flattered, and



famous. A suitor might not have loved her for herself alone, for wealth and fame always have their devotees."

"While I being poor and obscure have no attractions for any one, you mean?"

"You should thank God for it, for you may be sure that any honorable man who asks your hand in marriage must feel a sincere and disinterested love for you, so you can bestow it upon him in all confidence, unless he has the misfortune not to please you," concluded Dartige, with an anxiety he did not attempt to conceal.

"Such a man as you describe is my ideal," murmured the girl, equally agitated, "but I am acquainted with no such person, and I don't think I ever shall be."

"Would you like to make his acquaintance?" asked Dartige, with a look that spoke volumes.

The decisive moment had come. The conversation had gradually assumed such a personal character that only a single step was now necessary to arrive at a final understanding. Andrea, startled by this direct question, suddenly perceived that Dartige had placed her in a position where she could not avoid giving a direct answer.

This answer was upon her lips, for she fondly loved this noble lover who had spoken to her so frankly, but she could scarcely believe so much happiness was in store for her, and dared not say yes until she was sure that all this was not a dream.

It was necessary to make some response, however. Dartige was evidently waiting for it.

"I should like Madame de Listrac to make his acquaintance first," she finally stammered, with a poor attempt at a smile.

"Oh, as to that," cried Dartige, "the only reason I have not spoken to her is that I wished, first of all, to know if there was any hope of my finding favor in your eyes, and I have never had an opportunity to ascertain until now."

"You might have asked me in my godmother's presence, I should have answered you with the same frankness," replied Andrea, softly.

"May I venture to call your attention to the fact that you have not answered me yet," said her lover, smiling.

"I will consult Madame de Listrac, after you have spoken to her."

"And if she advises you not to condemn me to despair by a refusal?"

"I always obey her counsels, unquestioningly," replied the girl, her eyes drooping, and a deep blush rising to her cheek.

"Then I am sure that I shall soon be the happiest of men. Madame de Listrac knows me. She knows, too, that I am utterly incapable of feigning a love I do not feel. I am sure that she will plead my cause. I should have applied to her before, if she had not been on the eve of an event that is going to affect her whole life. Her return to the stage will be a brilliant triumph, I am almost certain; still, she has enemies who may combine to ruin her. It was to inform her of their plans that I came here to-day. It will not take me long to do that, however, and then—"

Dartige did not complete the sentence, and Andrea, glancing up at him inquiringly, perceived that his eyes were fixed upon a



man who was walking along the sidewalk on the side of the square next to the Théâtre-Lyrique.

"What is the matter?" inquired the girl, anxiously, for a cloud had suddenly overspread her companion's face.

"One might suppose that he was going to the Théâtre-Lyrique," murmured Dartige, instead of replying. "Yes, he is going straight toward it. Evidently it is upon her that he has designs. How can he have so much assurance, and what is he intending to do?"

"Of whom are you speaking?" inquired Andrea.

"Do you see that man?"

"The one you are watching so attentively? Yes, certainly."

"That is the Count de Listrac."

"My godmother's husband! Good heavens! he may have evil designs—"

"He never has any other. But I can not imagine what they are, in this case."

"What if he should be intending to kill her!" exclaimed Andrea, springing up.

"Men of his stamp do not kill. He has probably come to extort more money from his wife—to frighten her by threatening to oppose her return to the stage, and induce her to purchase the consent for which he will make her pay a handsome price, I warrant you."

"We might hasten to the theater in advance of him, and warn my godmother," suggested Andrea. "She has forbidden me to enter the building, but you can easily obtain admission—"

"No; my interference would only injure Madame de Listrac, and yours would be useless. What we had better do is to watch her husband. Pray sit down, mademoiselle. He has not seen us, fortunately, and I am very anxious that he should not."

Andrea complied with this request, and then concentrated her whole attention upon M. de Listrac who had just passed the south-east corner of the square.

She saw him walk slowly across the Avenue Victoria, then pause, as if reluctant to proceed further; but he finally turned into the little street that extends behind the theater as far as the quay. The performers' entrance to the Théâtre-Lyrique is on this street, and there could be no further doubt that the count intended to obtain an interview with his wife if possible.

"She will refuse to see him," said Andrea. "Godmother has given strict orders that no callers shall be admitted."

"In that case, he will wait for her outside," replied Dartige.

A few moments afterward, the count reappeared, and began walking up and down the broad sidewalk in front of the Théâtre-Lyrique.

Dartige's prediction was correct: the count was waiting for his wife.

"I knew he would not obtain admission," said Andrea.

"He did not try," replied her companion. "He merely went in to inquire when the rehearsal would be over, and as he was told that it would not last much longer, he will remain here until Madame de Listrac comes out. We can witness their interview from a distance, for Madame de Listrac, knowing that you are waiting for her, will not allow her husband to escort her home. I assure you



that you need apprehend no violent scene. See, he appears perfectly calm."

"That is true, and yet I can not help thinking that some danger threatens godmother."

"A danger, yes; but I hope that she will escape it. Her safety depends entirely upon herself. We are powerless to aid her. If she has the courage to refuse to listen to this man, she will be safe from his persecutions henceforth and forever."

"There she is!" exclaimed Andrea. "She sees him, and draws back. But he approaches her—he is speaking to her."

"And she does not repulse him," said Dartige, sadly. "She is right, after all. If she attempted to flee from him, he would follow her. It is better for her to finish with him here and now."

"She will. Don't you see by her manner that she is resolved not to listen to him?"

"She is listening, however,—and see, she is answering him."

The husband and wife were certainly not quarreling. On the contrary, they stood upon the sidewalk talking quietly. Passers-by would have taken them for friends who had met by chance and paused to exchange a few commonplace remarks.

But if Andrea and Dartige could have overheard the conversation, they would have realized that this interview was to decide Clara Monti's destiny.

"What do you desire?" were her first words to her husband.

"What is your object in coming here?"

"I have come to implore your forgiveness," replied M. de Listrac, humbly.

"After what you have done, forgiveness is equivalent to forgetfulness. You are already forgotten. I hoped I should never set eyes on you again."

"And my one desire has been to see you. I did not know where you had taken refuge. It was only yesterday that I learned, through the papers, of your contemplated return to the stage, and supposing you rehearsed every day, I hastened here without a moment's delay."

"Doubtless to inform me that I can not make my *début* without your consent. I am aware that your consent is a legal necessity, but I shall dispense with it. Try to prevent it if you dare."

"I have brought you my written consent."

"Oh, yes, I understand. How much do you ask for it?"

The count lifted his hand to his eyes, ostensibly to dash away a tear. Perhaps the tear was really there, for he knew how to weep when necessity required.

"So you despise me," he said, in a voice tremulous with emotion.

"Yes," replied Mme. de Listrac, unfalteringly.

"I deserve this treatment at your hands," said the count, with admirably feigned emotion, "but I have not the ignoble intentions you impute to me. Here is my consent in writing," he added, handing her a folded sheet of paper.

Clara took it without opening it or making any reply. The blow had told. She was already beginning to reproach herself for having accused her husband of an unworthy act he had not thought of committing.

"Now, I trust you will no longer suspect me of wishing to extort



money from you," continued Listrac. "Allow me now, to try, not to justify, but to explain, my conduct. To convince you that my repentance is sincere, I will begin by a full confession of my faults. Yes. I have deceived you most shamefully. I have broken my plighted word; I have been guilty of the very sins which I solemnly promised, at your feet, never to commit again. I was mad; my fortune had been swallowed up in stock speculations—I attempted to retrieve my losses at the gaming-table. I forgot that I was risking my honor, and I lost all."

"All this matters very little to me," interrupted Clara. "Talk to me rather about that woman who has usurped my place in your affections. Are you going to pretend that you did not know what you were doing when you allowed her to drive me from my home?"

"You may believe me or not, but I swear—no, I have no longer a right to swear—I declare that she concealed from me her intention of purchasing the house. When I learned what she had done, it was too late to prevent the profanation. I can not think without a blush of shame of the terrible evening on which I learned all this from the farewell letter you had left for me. I had returned home disgusted with myself, incensed with the heartless coquette who had caused us both so much misery, and ready to fall at your feet to implore a forgiveness that you would not have refused me. But you were no longer there. I found only the cruel lines in which you curtly informed me that all was over between us. Then, I thought strongly of killing myself, and often since, I have regretted that I did not blow my brains out on my knees before the arm-chair where you had so generously pardoned me only a few days before."

"And on leaving the home I had relinquished to this woman, you returned to her society," said Clara, bitterly.

"Yes; I was not then entirely cured of the poison she had poured out for me, but I am now. I was bewitched for a time; but the charm has flown. I know her now as she really is, this hateful and heartless creature who maddened my brain, and ruined my life. She now inspires me only with horror and loathing."

"And you have sacrificed everything for her. I pity you," said Clara, dryly.

"Do not pity me: on the contrary, congratulate me upon my recovery from the hideous nightmare that oppressed me so long, and upon having summoned up courage to at last make a resolve worthy of a man."

"What! do you come to announce that you have quarreled with Madame de Benserade, and that you wish to return to me?"

"You wrong me. I know that I am not worthy to be your husband, and I do not blame you for refusing to bear my name. That of Clara Monti is far nobler, for it is stainless, and you will yet make it illustrious. I do not ask to be reinstated in your favor. What I desire is to atone for my faults, or at least to expiate them by honest toil."

"What do you propose to do?"

"What I ought to have done a month ago—leave the country. There is no place in France for a nobleman who has dishonored himself."

"That is to say, who can not pay his new gambling debts," said



Clara, ironically, for she placed little confidence in these protestations of repentance, and already began to anticipate a request for a fresh loan.

"If I were merely a bankrupt, I should remain in Paris," the count replied. "I should be expelled from the club, but that would only be a punishment proportionate to the fault, but—I will have the courage to tell the truth—I am a forger."

Clara started violently. She was not prepared for so much frankness.

"No one is aware of the crime I have committed, as you have had the generosity to be silent in regard to it;" the count continued, "but you know it, and that is more than I can bear. I will not be obliged to blush and hang my head with shame in the presence of the woman I respect—and love. I will go away to die far from her, and with my latest breath I will pray that she may be happy—and that she may not curse me."

This time, Clara, who had heretofore kept the count at a distance, made such a sudden and unmistakable movement toward him, that Dartige and Andrea, who were watching the pair from a distance, instantly perceived it. They exchanged anxious glances, and Dartige muttered between his set teeth:

"She is going to yield. Ah! why did I allow the wretch to live! I ought to have compelled him to fight with me, and I am sure that I should have killed him!"

Mme. de Listrac had not yet forgiven her erring husband, however. His confession had touched her deeply, and she approved his plan of exiling himself; but she did not believe his protestations of affection, and had strong doubts of the sincerity of his resolution.

"You have decided wisely," she said, forcing herself to be calm. "There is no other way by which you can retrieve your character in my eyes and in the eyes of the world. When do you start?"

"In three days. My passage is engaged upon a vessel that is about to sail from London for Australia. There, I intend to engage in mining, and I shall land in Melbourne with a small sum of money that must suffice for my support until I can obtain a situation in some mining company. You see I have made all my arrangements. As for my creditors, I shall write to them before my departure and ask them to wait. I will pay them—when better days come."

"Your creditors—I thought you had none. The debts you contracted in your speculations were all paid."

"Yes, by you, and I received one hundred thousand francs from the money-lender who discounted the notes that bore your—indorsement. But I again fell a victim to the demon of play, and I lost everything. I have barely enough left to defray the expenses of my journey, and am greatly in debt besides."

"How much do you owe?"

"Nearly eighty thousand francs; but as I said before, my creditors will wait. I have alluded to my financial condition only to convince you that it will be impossible for me to remain in Paris, and that you need have no fears of seeing me again. I came here in search of you, simply because the thought of leaving France without making a full confession to you was intolerable. Besides, I thought that my absence, which will probably be prolonged into



years, might place you in an embarrassing position. You are about to resume the profession in which you won both fame and fortune; and you are right. It is the only way by which you can repair the breaches I have made in your fortune, and I sincerely wish you success. I feared, however, that some future manager—for you will not always sing at the Théâtre-Lyrique, might insist upon having my consent, before signing any contract with you. You have it now, and there is nothing left for me but to bid you farewell.”

“Not until you have given me your address.”

“Why do you desire that? Can it be that you will consent to see me again before my departure?” asked Listrac, eagerly.

“No,” replied Clara, firmly. “If I ever see you again it will be on your return, when you have bravely expiated the evil you have wrought. But I shall perhaps have occasion to write to you to-morrow.”

A sudden gleam of joy shone in Listrac's eyes, but he replied humbly:

“If you deign to write to me I shall preserve your letter as a talisman, and I am sure that it will bring me good fortune.”

“I hope so. I rely upon your promise. But if you should deceive me again I should die!”

“Die! You talk of dying! Ah, give me a ray, a single ray of hope. Let me hope that in two years, in five years, in ten years, when you think I have suffered enough, you will allow me to again appear before you.”

“I can not say what I will do in the years to come, but now we must separate. Some one is waiting for me.”

“I have lost the right to ask who?” murmured the count, shaking his head sadly.

“I will tell you. I have taken Vitale Vitellio's daughter under my protection.”

“He was the painter you were to marry long ago in Florence.”

“And who was murdered by an unknown assassin. His daughter came to Paris expressly to see me. I tell you this because my enemies may have slandered me and circulated a report that Andrea is my daughter.”

“Such a thing is not unlikely, and it makes me sick at heart when I think that I shall no longer be here to defend you.”

“I can defend myself,” replied Clara, quietly turning toward the square in which she had told Andrea to wait for her.

The count followed her, and for a moment the husband and wife walked on, side by side.

“All is lost!” thought Dartige. “She has become reconciled with him.”

He did not read Clara's heart aright, however. She was deeply moved, but she did not think for an instant of making any change in her plans, and she now paused in the middle of the avenue to dismiss M. de Listrac.

“I have already requested you to leave me,” she said, coldly. “Our interview has lasted long enough. You will hear from me to-morrow. Be content with this assurance, and go.”

“Ah! I understand why you are in such haste to leave!” exclaimed Listrac. “Monsieur Dartige is waiting for you.”



"How dare you? Of what use is it to talk to me of—"

Clara did not finish the sentence, for, turning suddenly, she perceived Dartige and Andrea coming toward her.

On seeing her approach with Listrac, Dartige could restrain himself no longer, and thinking his interference might prevent the countess from again falling into this unscrupulous scoundrel's clutches, he hastened toward her, dragging Andrea along with him.

"You are right, Monsieur Dartige is here," Clara said, coldly. "I was not aware of the fact before, but I am very glad to see him. He is the only friend I have left, and you see that I am not afraid to intrust my adopted daughter to his care. You have no right to demand an explanation of him, and I have no account to render to you. Go, and at once. If you persist in following me, in defiance of my commands, I shall take effectual measures to rid myself of you—and I swear that I will not write to you to-morrow."

M. de Listrac doubtless understood the covert meaning of this last threat, for, instead of insisting, he contented himself with expressing his grief and submission by a rather theatrical gesture; then, with an angry glance at Dartige, and a despairing look at his wife, he hastened off without once pausing to look behind him.

His ruse had succeeded. He had obtained what he desired.

Clara watched him until he had disappeared around the corner of the Rue de Rivoli.

His departure was timely, for the poor creature's heart was almost breaking. She had had strength to resist the pleadings of an only partially extinguished passion, but her powers of endurance were well-nigh exhausted.

Dartige and Andrea met her at the entrance to the square. They were quite as much embarrassed as she was, for though they had witnessed the interview they did not know whether to refer to it or not.

She did not give them time, however.

"I did not expect to meet you here, but I am very glad to see you, nevertheless," she said to Dartige, offering him her hand. "There is something I wish to say to you."

"And I, too, have something that I wish to say to you," he replied.

"I feel the need of a little exercise. Have you any objections to returning home on foot?" Clara said, turning to her adopted daughter.

"I was about to suggest it," replied Andrea. "I feel cold after sitting so long in the shadow of the tower." Then seeing a rather anxious look upon Mme. de Listrac's face, she added: "But I did not find the time at all long, thanks to Monsieur Dartige, who kindly kept me company."

"Then you have been with Andrea some time?" asked the countess.

Dartige answered the question without an instant's hesitation.

"You had just left mademoiselle," he said, "when I caught sight of her on crossing the square; I spoke to her and she told me she was waiting for you, so—"

"You did quite right, my friend," interrupted Clara. "Pray accompany us home. I wish to talk with you about some import-



ant matters. They will not interest Andrea in the least, however, so—”

“So I will walk on in advance of you, godmother,” exclaimed the young Italian, whose tact never deserted her. “If I get too far ahead of you call me.”

As she spoke she started off with a quick, elastic step, and Mme. de Listrac and Dartige walked on, side by side, without exchanging a word.

It was not until they reached the Place du Chatelet that the countess broke the silence.

“You saw me talking with Monsieur de Listrac, did you not?” she inquired.

“Yes,” replied Dartige, “and so did Mademoiselle Vitellio.”

“That does not matter. I have no secrets from her, no more than I have from you. I wish you to know all that passed between my husband and myself.”

“What if I should tell you that I can guess?”

“But you can not. He came to bring me his written consent for me to sign any engagement I may choose to make.”

“That is to say, he sold it to you. I was sure of it.”

“You are very much mistaken. He gave it to me without any conditions whatever.”

“How can you suppose that he has deprived himself out of pure kindness of heart of the only weapon he had against you? There is something concealed behind this generosity, believe me.”

“No, for I shall never see him again. He is about to leave France for many years, and, perhaps, forever.”

“He told you so, but—”

“It will be an easy matter for me to satisfy myself of the truth of his statements. I have his address, and in three days I shall know whether he has only been trying to deceive me or not. You, too, will know, for his departure will doubtless be the chief topic of conversation at the club. Monsieur de Listrac has lost everything. He has not money enough left to pay his debts even.”

“But he expects you to pay them.”

“I half offered to do so, but he refused.”

“Because he felt sure that you would do it even if he did protest. He has changed his tactics. He does not attempt to soften your heart by protestations of love, because he thinks that you will not allow yourself to be deceived by them a second time, but—”

“Then you do not think that a man who has sinned so deeply is capable of repentance?” interrupted Clara.

“If your husband repents of anything it is of having lost at the baccarat table all the money he succeeded in extorting from you. No, I do not believe in these sudden conversions. A man may return to the path of rectitude, but not in a single day. He must first regenerate himself by honest effort.”

“I agree with you, my friend, and that is exactly what I just said to Monsieur de Listrac. But he is going to begin his work of expiation by exiling himself and earning his daily bread by arduous toil. By and by, I am to judge him by his conduct, and see if I can forgive him.”

“And has he accepted these conditions?”



"He himself proposed them; and if I offer him any assistance before his departure it will be entirely of my own free will, for he did not ask me for it."

"What! you think of giving him more money! Ah! if I only dared to tell you what use he will make of it."

"I understand you, my friend, but he assures me that he has parted from that woman forever, and it is a comfort to me to believe it. If I am mistaken do not rob me of my illusions. They will cost me only a little money, for I swear to you by all I hold most sacred, that all is at an end between him and me. If I have resolved upon a final sacrifice, it is only because I do not wish any more contumely heaped upon the name I have borne. Nor will this sacrifice embarrass me to any great extent. The sale of my household furniture, and of my horses and carriages has yielded quite a handsome amount which my notary holds at my disposal. If I devote it to saving my husband from the disgrace of not paying his gambling debts I am sure that Andrea will never reproach me."

"Andrea!" repeated Dartige, surprised and not a little annoyed.

"Yes, for she will inherit all my property at my death. My will is already made. I have an idea that I shall not live very long, and after my death the dear child will be quite wealthy. She will not be obliged to go upon the stage, consequently, and that is a great comfort to me, for I confess that it would pain me very much to think that she would ever be exposed to all the dangers that environ a young and beautiful prima donna."

"And now that I have told you all my plans, let us change the subject. Let us talk of my *début*. My *début*! I can not help smiling when I utter the word. One would think I was twenty again. If I succeed my triumph will complete my rejuvenation, and I must succeed, for a failure would kill me. I have even taken measures not to survive it."

"What do you mean?" cried Dartige.

"Nothing. I was only thinking of my will. However, I shall not be obliged to remain in this state of uncertainty long. The first performance of 'Romeo and Juliet' is announced for Friday next. Juliet is my best rôle. All the other characters are admirably sustained by members of the new troupe, organized by my manager. If I fail it will be because there is no longer any place for me in the world."

"By the way, what do you think the result will be? You go into society a great deal, and you know what people predict? The fact that I intend to return to the stage is known by everybody now. What do you hear said about it?"

"All whose opinion is of any value, think that your return will be a triumph; but you know that you have enemies as well as I do."

"I have but one that I know of—Madame de Benserade—and I do not think that she will have the audacity to hiss me."

"She is capable of anything; and she will be aided and abetted by men and women who are no better than she is. It is not impossible that she will get them together to disturb the performance, especially if Monsieur de Listrac has quarreled with her, as you say. A rumor is afloat that a cabal has been formed; and I came ex-



pressly to warn you of the fact; but I am satisfied that the public will silence the malevolent, and that its judgment will prevail."

"Heaven grant it! You will be there, will you not? Your presence will encourage me; besides, I promised Andrea that I would take her with me; and I am anxious that you should be there to take care of her. She is so young and so enthusiastic that the excitement might turn her head completely. I shall depend upon you to persuade her to listen to reason.

"By the way, you have just had a long talk with her. What did she say to you about her pet scheme of going upon the stage? A scheme I don't approve of at all."

"I have done my best to dissuade her from it; and I flatter myself that I have succeeded. But I scarcely dare to tell you the means I employed."

"You probably represented to her that a pure young girl ought to marry an honest man, and that a good husband is worth far more than the plaudits of a crowd that will perhaps hiss her to-morrow."

Dartige seemed in no haste to reply. He felt that after his conversation with Andrea, he ought to frankly admit to Mme. de Listrac that he had just offered himself to her *protégée*, and yet he hesitated. The words did not come. He wondered how the countess, whom he had formerly loved, would take this avowal. A woman may not reciprocate nor even value a man's affection in the least, but she is seldom pleased to learn that this man loves another. His position was an embarrassing one; but the best way to get out of it was to tell the truth without reserve.

"I did still better," he replied at last. "I proposed to her."

"Proposed to her!" cried Mme. de Listrac. "You, who are wealthy, and hold a high social position, you would marry a comparatively poor and obscure girl. And your career?"

"I can renounce that without the slightest regret. I am even sorry that I have not done it before. An opportunity to insure my lifelong happiness presents itself, and I intend to take advantage of it."

"Are you in earnest?"

"So deeply in earnest that I have just made her a declaration of love; and you surely do not think me capable of attempting to deceive any young girl, and especially one whom you love as if she were your own daughter?"

"What answer did she give you?"

"She told me she should be guided entirely by your advice; and, by the way, I think she suspects what we are talking about."

Andrea, taking Mme. de Listrac's hint, had walked briskly on for awhile, keeping quite a long way ahead of them, but after a time she slackened her pace, and when she reached the long portico of the museum, the distance between her and her friends had been very sensibly diminished. The place was well adapted for an explanation; for pedestrians are rare upon the Quai de Louvre.

The countess called to her adopted daughter, who instantly paused, and began to retrace her steps.

"Is what Monsieur Dartige tells me true?" inquired Clara, almost brusquely. "He tells me that he wishes to become your



husband; and he adds that you are not unwilling he should be, if I have no objections."

"It is true," replied Andrea, without the slightest hesitation.

"You love him, then? Why have you never admitted as much to me?"

"Because I did not know that he loved me."

Andrea had no false modesty, and did not know how to cast down her eyes and stammer, like most well-bred young ladies, so she looked the honorable man who had asked her to marry him full in the face, as she frankly accepted his offer.

The countess appeared much more deeply agitated than the child of her adoption. Turning her eyes upward, as if to implore God's blessing on this quiet betrothal, she faltered,

"It is well! May you be happier than I am!"

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## CHAPTER VII.

THE eventful evening is come. The façade of the Théâtre-Lyrique is ablaze with lights, and a long line of carriages is depositing a crowd of white-cravated gentlemen, and diamond-decked ladies at the door. Every seat in the house was sold three days ago. All the fashionables of Paris are assembled there.

Not a few persons, who were unable to purchase seats, have come just the same, for fear it should be said that they failed to witness the great prima-donna's *début*.

It sufficed such as these to be able to be seen in the foyer with a gardenia in their button-hole, and to bow to the fashionables of their acquaintance as they pass. To-morrow they will describe their impressions, go into ecstasies over the most effective scenes, and criticise the rendering of certain airs which they did not even hear.

The morning papers will furnish them with the necessary information.

The *impresario* who had staked his fortune upon Clara Monti's success, had, of course, advertised the performance of "Romeo and Juliet," with its exceptionally brilliant cast, as extensively as possible. This outlay of money was entirely unnecessary, however, for his flaming placards had been far less potent than the gossip of fashionable drawing-rooms, where this step on the part of the Countess de Listrac had been the all-absorbing topic of conversation for a week past.

The count, too, had received his full share of public criticism. His conduct since his separation from his wife began to be severely censured, and public sentiment was fast becoming openly hostile to him.

It was not much more favorable to his victim, however. Many did not hesitate to say that Clara should have remained in seclusion. If she had not money enough to live upon, she might be excused for resuming the profession by which she had acquired the fortune her husband had in great part squandered; but it was known that she had not been reduced to abject poverty, so she was greatly blamed for disgracing the title she had borne for five years past, by a return to the stage, for no one seemed to think for a moment that she had been actuated by a sincere love for her art.



In short, Clara Monti was to be judged by a curious rather than friendly audience. She knows it, and does not feel sanguine of success by any means.

She has good reason to feel satisfied in several other respects, however.

Andrea's marriage will take place in a short time. Dartige has resigned his diplomatic position and devotes his whole time to his betrothed. He is a welcome visitor at all hours; and it has been decided that he will wed Vitale Vitellio's daughter as soon as Clara Monti's engagement is concluded. All three will then leave for Florence, where the marriage will be solemnized in the Church of Santa Maria Novella.

In compliance with the orders of the countess, M. Jouin transmitted to M. de Listrac the amount necessary to pay the gambling debts recently contracted at the club. The entire proceeds of the sale of Clara's household furniture went in this way. On the receipt of this money, the count addressed to his wife a note containing only the following words:

"Heaven bless you—you who have never cursed me. I leave Paris this evening, and I shall perhaps never see you again. Let me tell you once more that I love you, and that my last thought will be of you. Farewell. Think of me sometimes in my exile."

Clara carried this touching letter in her bosom, and read and re-read it times without number; but she had not neglected to ascertain if George had really kept his promise. Inquiries cautiously made by M. Jouin elicited the information that M. de Listrac, after settling his debts at the club and elsewhere, had left by rail, for London.

Consequently, he was now on his way to Australia; and the tender-hearted Clara almost began to regret that she had permitted him to depart.

Dartige had also investigated the matter, and satisfied himself beyond a doubt that the count had visited the club only to withdraw his notes from the safe in which they had been deposited, and pay them; and none of the members of the club doubted Listrac's departure. Some few pitied him; others had already forgotten him.

So Clara now has nothing to fear; at least nothing but the verdict of the public; and for two days she has been thinking only of her *rôle*. There has been no public rehearsal, as the manager was anxious to avoid premature criticism on the part of the journalists; but Clara feels tolerably sure of herself, and the other members of the troupe predict a great success.

While the audience gradually takes possession of the spacious theater, the prima-donna is completing her toilet in her dressing-room, assisted by Andrea, whom she has brought with her, according to promise.

Albert Dartige is waiting in the actors' foyer for her to call him when her toilet is completed; and to pass away the time, he enters into conversation with the manager, who is bustling about with a well-satisfied air.

"What do you think the result will be?" inquires Dartige.

"A brilliant triumph, my dear sir. There will be a shower of



bouquets; and the Monti will be recalled a dozen times. All the notables of Paris are here. Have you seen the audience? No? Well, come with me."

The manager leads Dartige through the wings, where Capulet's guests were already assembling, across the brilliantly lighted ball-room in which Romeo is to meet Juliet in the first act, and straight to the lowered curtain.

By placing his eye to one of the holes in the canvas, Dartige perceived that the manager had not exaggerated. The theater was magnificently decorated, and what was far better, it was nearly full, though it was scarcely eight o'clock. Fashionable society, contrary to its custom, had honored the Countess de Listrac by arriving before the beginning of the overture.

Dartige saw many familiar faces; among them, that of his friend Chantal, who occupied a seat in the first row of orchestra chairs; while in a box on the left of the stage sat Mme. de Benserade, in a startling toilet, and loaded with jewels. She was not alone in her box, but had brought Moulières and two other gentlemen with her, but no companion of her own sex, her device being: "I, in myself, am sufficient."

"Well, what do you think of it?" asked the manager, rubbing his hands, complacently. "Are there not flowers and diamonds in profusion? All the flowers will be on the stage before the end of the evening. The diva will walk upon a bed of camellias and violets."

"I hope and believe so. But there are some here who have come to hiss rather than applaud."

"Hiss? hiss, did you say? What can you be thinking of, sir? Does any one ever dare to hiss at the Italiens. I expect my theater to outvie the Italiens in its palmiest days—the days of Patti and Grisi. My audience is composed of the *élite* of the city, and Clara Monti is the greatest singer of modern times. If any one ventures to make the slightest disturbance he will be unceremoniously hustled out of doors."

Just then, the stage-director came up to say that everything was in readiness, and Dartige thought he might venture to present himself at the prima-donna's dressing-room. He found her radiantly lovely in the rich toilet which set off her stately beauty to wonderful advantage.

Her eyes sparkled with excitement, and her lips were wreathed in smiles. It was evident that she felt no misgivings now.

"So here you are, my friend!" she said, offering Dartige her hand. "I have been a long time dressing. What do you think of my toilet?"

"It is superb and wonderfully becoming."

"It seems to me that I do not look so very much older, after all, and I never was in better voice. But I hear the bell. The curtain is about to rise, and I go on in the third scene. Accompany me to the place where Capulet, my noble father, awaits me, and then take good care of Andrea for me, the rest of the evening."

"As Monsieur Dartige will be with me, are you not willing that I should stay in the *coulisses*. There, I can see and hear you."

"If the stage-director makes no objections and if our friend here,



doesn't dislike the idea of being jostled by the Veronese who are going to sing the opening chorus."

As Clara left her dressing-room in company with Dartige, she turned to him, and whispered hastily:

"That woman is here, is she not?"

"Alas! yes, but—"

"Oh, I do not fear her now. My husband is far away. He must have sailed yesterday. She has already found consolers, I suppose, and I am not sorry for her to witness my *début*, for if it should prove a success, it will be some slight revenge for the wrong she has done me.

"Now, my friend, I must give my attention to my rôle, so return to her who will soon be your wife. You know what an excitable temperament she has, so if she becomes too deeply agitated, endeavor to calm her."

Andrea, who had followed them closely, flung her arms around the neck of her protectress to kiss her.

"Remember my rouge and pearl powder!" cried Clara gayly. "I have had no end of trouble in making myself up. You shall kiss me after the last act—after the scene in the tomb. I shall be dead, but I will come to life to allow you to give me a dozen of your hearty kisses."

Just then, the signal was given for the third scene, and the prima-donna walked away, preceded by the stage-manager.

Capulet's guests, male and female, in masks and dominos, were singing the chorus, *L'heure s'envole, joyeuse et folle*. The *fête* was beginning, slightly disturbed by the opening and shutting of doors, and the noisy clicking of the seats as their owners took possession of them.

Then the house gradually became more quiet, and the audience more attentive as the short recitative that precedes the entrance of Juliet began.

When she appeared led by her noble father, there was an instant's hesitation. Every glass was leveled upon her, and those among the audience who had known the Countess de Listrac asked themselves if it could really be she they saw before them, looking at least ten years younger than formerly, and quite beautiful enough to captivate the heart of any Romeo of ancient or modern times.

She advanced slowly and paused before the orchestra began the prelude to the dancing air. Then, and not until then, did she look at the audience, which now burst into a storm of applause.

The ice was broken; sympathy and admiration took possession of every heart, and even those who had inveighed most loudly against her return to the stage, were compelled to do homage to her stately beauty and regal carriage.

Clara lifted her head, and without a bow or gesture returned thanks merely by an eloquent glance.

Dartige breathed freely again. The victory was well-nigh won since they applauded the woman before the singer had opened her lips; and Andrea, speechless with emotion, silently pressed her lover's hand.

Then came the entrance of Romeo accompanied by his friend,



Mercutio, who sung "Queen Mab," to which little attention was paid; then, the conversation between Juliet and her nurse.

All this, however, serves merely as an introduction to the *morceau* in the first act, the famous duet with Romeo for which the audience always wait anxiously in order to decide if the singer who has assumed the rôle of Juliet is really a great artiste, or only a more or less well-trained soprano, devoid of soul and intelligence.

There is more than one way of rendering this exquisite *duo*; and singers who are not thoroughly *en rapport* with the situation often strive to produce effects not suited to it. It should be sung very simply, and not without a certain reserve. Romeo casts this reserve aside, however, when he tries to press a kiss upon the hand of Juliet, who finally yields, giving vent to her emotion in the musical cry: "*Ah, je n'ai pu m'en défendre.*"

Uttered by Clara Monti, it moved the entire audience, and was followed by one of those murmurs of admiration that are more flattering than the loudest applause.

After this first triumph, there could be no doubt that others were to follow, for this prima-donna evidently excelled in impassioned scenes, and the rest of the play is made up of these, while the first act contains only this tender episode in which she could give a foretaste of her power.

Dartige did not care to remain to witness the expulsion of Romeo and his friend from the entertainment of the Capulets, so he proposed to his companion that they should return to Mme. Listrac's dressing-room to offer her their congratulations, and Andrea needed no urging.

They reached it in advance of the prima-donna who soon entered, escorted by the manager, who was profuse in his praises and compliments. Mme. de Listrac seemed strangely unmoved by them however, and even dismissed him rather brusquely, on the pretext that she wished to save her voice as much as possible, and as this voice was his most precious treasure, he took good care not to insist.

Juliet makes no change in her costume between the first and second acts, so the attendant was also dismissed, and Clara Monti was left alone with Dartige and Andrea.

"It was a success, was it not?" she asked.

"Yes; in every sense of the word. And this triumph is nothing in comparison with what is to come. You will create a *furore* in the *duc de l'Alouette*."

"Heaven grant it!" murmured the countess.

"Can it be possible that you have any doubts of it?"

"No. I feel sure that I shall sing it well, and yet—I am afraid."

"Afraid of what? The audience are in raptures, and even the other members of the troupe are lauding you to the skies."

"They have all been kindness itself to me. Romeo found an opportunity to compliment me in the highest terms when he kissed my hand. In former years, I should have been radiant; now, I feel strangely depressed. I am haunted by a presentiment of approaching misfortune, and when I stepped upon the stage I fancied I was going to be hissed."

"And you have been applauded, *con furore*, as they say in Italy."

"Yes, even in the first box on the left," said Clara, with a mean-



ing glance at Dartige. "I noticed Monsieur des Moulieres there. Who are the others?"

"Some of his worthless associates probably."

"It was so dark in the box that I could not see the persons who were seated in the back part of it," remarked Clara.

"I looked, but I think there is no one there. If you wish to be certain, however, I have a friend in one of the orchestra chairs who can ascertain for me."

"You would oblige me very much by asking him then. The intermission will be quite long as they have to set the balcony scene, and you will have plenty of time to exchange a few words with your friend and return here before the curtain rises."

"I am at your service, of course; though I do not understand why you should feel the slightest anxiety. I know that the occupants of the box are unfriendly to you, but they will not dare to indulge in any hostile demonstration."

"It is not that I fear."

"Then what can it be?"

"I can hardly explain, my friend," replied the countess. "My imagination is very apt to get the better of me. I am extremely nervous this evening, and I must not be if I would acquit myself well in my great duet in the next act. Do me the favor to set my fears at rest by obtaining this information for me."

"You understand me, do you not?"

Dartige did understand perfectly, but he was astonished at this change in Mme. de Listrac's mood. Before stepping upon the stage, she had been brave and composed; nor had she evinced the slightest reluctance to brave the malevolence of her rival; but now, she seemed afraid to reappear before her, and was evidently consumed by an intense anxiety to ascertain who Mme. de Benserade's companions were. Could it be she fancied that her husband was in the box—her husband who must now be on his way to Australia?

However this might be, Dartige could but obey. He found that Chantal had left his seat, probably to go out into the foyer. Before following him there, Dartige cast a searching glance at the suspected box, but detected no change there except that Moulieres and his friends had moved back, leaving in the front of the box only the baroness, who sat talking to them, with her back to the audience.

Seeing that he would gain nothing by remaining there, Dartige made his way to the foyer, where he had no difficulty in finding Chantal, who slipped an arm in his, remarking as he did so:

"I felt sure that you would be here this evening, but I have been looking for you in vain."

"I accompanied Madame de Listrac, and—"

"And you have been staying in her dressing-room or in the coulises. I suspected as much. But you ought to say Clara Monti. There is no longer any Madame de Listrac. She certainly acted wisely in resuming her former profession, for she sings superbly, and the stage will suit her much better than married life. She is well rid of her rascally husband at last, I hear. I was told yesterday at the club that he had left for some unknown land."

"For Australia."

"A good riddance to him! But I am surprised that he has taken



it into his head to exile himself. Men of his stamp generally sink lower and lower, until they reach the very slums. Are you sure that he has left Paris? The baroness is here this evening, with Moulieres, and two or three other gentlemen, I notice."

"I saw them, and came to ask you if there is not another of our acquaintances with them. From your seat you can command an excellent view of the box and its occupants."

"Do you think I have been wasting my time in watching that good-for-nothing set? I have scarcely glanced at them. Still, it does seem to me that I noticed quite a commotion in the box just now. Those who had been sitting in the front of the box turned, and finally seemed to gather around some new-comer. I can't tell you who he was, as I did not see him, but what difference can it make to you? You surely have nothing in common with that crowd?"

"No, certainly not, but—"

"Where have you been keeping yourself? You are certainly spending your six months leave in a singular manner. After being snowed up in Russia for five years you return to Paris, and instead of going about and enjoying yourself you bury yourself like a hermit."

"That is because I shall have plenty of time at my disposal by and by. My vacation will never end, for I have sent in my resignation."

"So much the better. You ought to have given up such an unprofitable profession long ago. I am very glad to hear it. I shall have a friend, a congenial friend now, and we will resume the life of former years."

"With one very important difference, however. I am about to marry."

"Nonsense! Can it be that you are going to marry the Monti! No. What a fool I am. She is not a widow, that is unless her husband has been drowned at sea. By the way, I understand now why you asked me the question you did just now. You fancied that he had not gone, but was hiding in Madame de Benserade's box. He is quite capable of such a thing, but I hope you will not try to pick a quarrel with him if you meet him. A gentleman can not fight with a scoundrel like that."

"Besides, such an encounter would be absurd for a number of reasons," continued Chantal. "In the first place, his life does not compare with yours in value, and you would make a great mistake in fighting with him, for he might kill you, while if you should kill him you could not decently marry his widow."

"You can set your mind at rest on that score, my dear fellow," said Dartige. "I have no more idea of marrying Madame de Listrac than I have of challenging her husband, who must now be traversing the waters of the broad Atlantic."

"But you just told me that you were contemplating immediate marriage. Who is the fortunate lady?"

"A young lady who is under Madame de Listrac's protection."

"But where did she come from? No one has ever seen her at the Countess de Listrac's, or anywhere else."

"She came from Italy about six weeks ago."



"And that has been long enough for you to fall so deeply in love as to wish to marry her. The deuce! you have certainly made quick work of it! And you have consulted only your own heart in making this matrimonial venture. This is delightful! Where does the young lady live?"

"She has been residing with Madame de Listrac ever since her arrival in Paris, and she accompanied that lady to the theater this evening."

"What! you think it well for your future wife to spend her evenings in the greenroom?"

"One evening only, and under my protection. I have just left her, and shall rejoin her again before the curtain rises."

"That is right, but if I were in your place I should ask Clara Monti to leave her *protégée* at home hereafter."

"No such request is necessary. That has already been agreed upon."

"And when is the wedding to come off?"

"I am to be married in Florence the latter part of the month of May."

"In Florence! And I have been flattering myself that I should have the pleasure of acting as one of the witnesses."

"And why can't you?"

"Impossible, my dear fellow. I can not leave Paris in the middle of the racing season. It is the only time that I am not bored to death, for I love horses. But I hope you will introduce me to your betrothed before your departure. What is her name?"

"Andrea Vitellio. She is the daughter of a distinguished Florentine artist."

"A tenor or basso, I suppose?"

"No, a painter who died while he was still young, and just as he was beginning to win a name for himself."

"Then he left his daughter no fortune, I suppose?"

"I have money enough for both of us."

The conversation suddenly came to a standstill. Dartige saw that Chantal did not approve of the marriage, and Chantal perceived that he had wounded his old friend by not sympathizing with his satisfaction.

They took several turns up and down the foyer, bowing and receiving bows in return, for there were many of their acquaintances present, but without exchanging a single word.

Dartige was saying to himself, "My most intimate friend thinks I am making a great mistake in marrying Andrea." Chantal was thinking, "Poor Albert must certainly have lost his senses, for this Italian is most probably a mere adventuress."

While they were both engrossed in thoughts like these the warning bell sounded, and the promenaders began to hasten back to their seats.

Dartige had promised to report to the countess before the beginning of the second act, so he had not a moment to lose.

"I must leave you, my dear fellow," he remarked to Chantal.

"But I shall see you again before the close of the performance, shall I not?" inquired his friend.



"Perhaps so, but in any case I shall drop in to see you to-morrow morning. I want to have a talk with you."

"I shall be glad to see you at any time, as you know. In the meantime you can reassure the countess, for I have seen no signs of her husband. I have an excellent lorgnette, and I will take another look at Madame de Benserade's box, however. If I should discover Listrac there I will certainly find some way to inform you of the fact, but by this time he must be many hundreds of miles away from here."

"I think so, too. Thank you. *Au revoir*, my friend."

They separated at the foot of the staircase, Chantal turning to the right, and Dartige to the left.

The door leading behind the scenes was at the end of the corridor, and to reach it one was obliged to pass the box occupied by the Baroness de Benserade. The man who usually guarded this door was not at his post, or rather he was on the other side of the door, and before rapping for him to open it Dartige could not help glancing at the suspected loge.

The oval window which serves as a ventilator for the boxes was not closed, and the sound of voices from within reached the eager ears of Clara's champion. The conversation was in a very high key, so high, indeed, as to give the impression that the inmates were quarreling, but as they were all talking at the same time Dartige could not distinguish what they were saying.

He was tempted for an instant to peer into the interior of the box through the opening, but this was an act of which no honorable man would be guilty, he felt, so he contented himself with drawing a little nearer and listening more attentively, without realizing that in doing this he was likewise playing the spy.

He was standing close to the door, and with his back to the entrance of the corridor, when he received a violent push from the rear, and this push was followed by a vigorous and well-directed blow.

Dartige, furious with anger, turned impetuously, resolved to inflict instant chastisement upon the rude person who had thrust him so roughly aside, but he paused, speechless with astonishment on finding himself face to face with the Count de Listrac, who, though equally astonished, gazed at Dartige with an insolent air, apparently waiting for him to speak.

He was not obliged to wait long.

"I knew that you were a scoundrel," said Dartige, white with anger, "but I did not know that you were a boor."

"I knew that you are my wife's lover," replied Listrac, "but I did not know that she was in the habit of sending you to listen at doors."

The only reply was a resounding blow that must have been heard in the box, for M. de Mouliere's face appeared at the window.

M. de Listrac made a movement as if to spring upon his assailant, who was quite strong enough to strangle him, but he restrained himself, and said, with comparative calmness:

"This time the difficulty will not end here, as at the Café Anglais. I shall kill you to-morrow, my fine gentleman."

"No, if there is any killing to be done you may rest assured that



"I shall do it," retorted Dartige. "You, however, will probably deem it more prudent to forget my address, as you did about a month ago. I do not ask yours because I do not suppose that you have any place of residence."

"Pardon me," sneered Listrac. "I have been spending a few days in England, it is true, and I returned to Paris only this evening, but I have resumed possession of the same apartments I occupied before my departure. My wife will tell you where they are. You may rest assured that you will see two of my friends at your house early to-morrow morning, however. Now, do me the favor to trespass upon my time no longer. I came here to enjoy myself, and do not wish to lose a single scene of 'Romeo and Juliet.'"

While the count was speaking the door of the box had been opened by one of its occupants, and Listrac took advantage of the opportunity to slip in and slam it in the face of Dartige, who did not kick it open as he felt strongly inclined to do.

The second act was just beginning, and any violence would be sure to attract Clara's attention to the box her husband had just entered.

Being in doubt as to what course to pursue Dartige finally decided to consult Chantal, so retracing his steps he endeavored to make his way to his friend's seat, but finding this an utter impossibility by reason of the crowd, he concluded to remain in the aisle until the end of the act.

In his agitation he had entirely forgotten the stage setting of the second act, though he had seen Gounod's opera performed more than once. The scenery represents a garden, with Juliet's home and its famous balcony on the left hand side of the stage, and as Mme. de Benserade's box was on the same side, the actress who personated Juliet could not see it from her balcony.

Dartige recollected the several scenes of this short act perfectly well.

First Juliet appears upon the balcony, beneath which Romeo sings, "Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon."

She finally descends, and even comes out into the garden; but only a little way. Indeed, she scarcely goes beyond the threshold, and re-enters the house almost instantly to escape Romeo's impassioned protestations of love, so Dartige had good reason to hope that Clara Monti would not neglect her acting to watch her rival's box, and that she consequently would fail to notice her husband.

In the third act Juliet appears only in the first scene, the one in which she marries Romeo in Friar Laurence's cell; and in which she could not see very plainly, as the lights would be dim.

The hopes of Dartige were realized. Clara Monti, utterly oblivious of the spectators, at least to all appearance, sung with such perfection the delicious morceau, "*Ah! tu sais que la nuit te cache mon visage*" ("Thou know'st the mask of night is on my cheek"), that there was an outburst of the wildest applause.

"Heaven grant that they do not recall her after the act!" thought Dartige. "In that case she will be obliged to advance to the foot-lights, and then all will be lost."

The curtain fell without any *contretemps* whatever, and Dartige succeeded in waylaying his friend Chantal on his way to the foyer.



"He is there!" he whispered.

"I saw him," replied Chantal, shrugging his shoulders; "but I noticed, too, that his wife did not seem to be much troubled by his presence."

"That is not the question now. I have just struck Listrac a blow in the face, and we fight to-morrow."

"And you think of imposing upon me the agreeable task of acting as your second, I suppose. I would much rather serve as a witness to your marriage, even though I were obliged to make the journey to Florence. You seem to have resolved to destroy all my peace of mind by your acts of folly."

"What you style acts of folly are only proofs of wisdom," retorted Dartige, quickly. "This marriage will insure my life-long happiness, and I can not, under penalty of disgracing myself, refuse to fight with a man I have struck."

"And how the deuce did you come in contact with this scoundrel, who will certainly end his days in a penitentiary?" asked Chantal.

"I met him in the corridor just as I was returning to the green-room. Listrac nearly knocked me down, either intentionally or unintentionally, and I called him a boor. He insulted me even more grossly; and—"

"And you struck him. I should have done the same. You are right, after all. As the wine is drawn we will have to drink it. I will act as one of your seconds, and will engage to find the other. Do you give me full permission to decide upon the conditions of the duel?"

"Yes, but I wish it to take place as soon as possible."

"It shall come off to-morrow. Meet me at the club, after the performance, and I will tell you what has been agreed upon. I will detain you no longer now, as I suppose you are in a hurry to rejoin the diva and your betrothed. My compliments to Clara Monti. She has been superb."

Dartige found the prima-donna in her dressing-room. She greeted him with a smile, and he saw by her serene face that she was still ignorant of her husband's presence.

Andrea did not seem as light-hearted as her benefactress.

"Is this the way you keep your promises?" cried Clara. "I ask you to return before the curtain rises, and you do not make your appearance until the act is over."

"That is true," replied Dartige. "I was detained by my friend until the act began, and not wishing to miss the balcony scene I remained in the hall. You rendered the great duet superbly. I can still hear the words you sung with so much expression."

"Yes, I was in capital voice; but your friend saw no one!"

"He had eyes only for you. He is enraptured with your singing."

This evasive reply dispelled Clara's apprehensions entirely.

"I thank you, my friend," she said, earnestly. "Thanks to you, I am now tranquil in mind, and I feel sure that everything will go on smoothly to the end. You must hear me sing the lark duet in the fourth act. I am almost sure that you will be well pleased. I had some misgiving at first, I must confess, especially as I could not keep my mind entirely upon my part; but it is very different now,



and I am beginning to enjoy my success. I was afraid, however; for it was a case of life or death for me—and I expected to die.”

This remark was capable of two entirely different interpretations, and had the manager been present, he would certainly have thought his prima-donna was firmly resolved not to survive a failure.

But Dartige knew that it was Listrac's presence that would have proved fatal to Clara; and her words troubled him greatly. He felt that she could not cherish the present illusion long, and yet he had not the courage to destroy it.

He turned to Andrea to hide his emotion, and he fancied that she read his thoughts, and seemed to share his fears; but Mme. de Listrac was blind to all this.

She began to talk of their approaching marriage, of the pleasure it would give her to visit Florence with them; of the happiness that was in store for them, and of her own plans for the future.

She had decided, she said, to sing five years longer—that would give her ample time to regain her former fortune—and she would then purchase a beautiful villa in Italy where Andrea and her husband must spend the winter months of each year with her.

The conversation was interrupted by the manager, who came to congratulate Clara, and also to complain of some of the trifling annoyances that are sure to mark the first performance of any opera. Romeo declared that he was completely exhausted, and felt afraid that he would break down in the lark duet; Nurse Gertrude had been attacked by a sudden fit of hoarseness; Friar Laurence was in a terrible passion because his robe was too tight in the arm-holes; and there was some trouble about the scenery that represented a street in Verona, with the Capulet mansion in the distance.

Clara listened patiently to all these grievances, and comforted him with the assurance that everything would come out all right. Now that she was no longer afraid of seeing her husband in Mme. de Benserade's company, nothing troubled her; and when some one came to tell her that the curtain was about to rise, she said gayly to Albert:

“I hope you will not leave Andrea at all this time. She will not remain quietly in my dressing-room, and I do not like her to stay alone in the *coulisses*.”

It was quite unnecessary to remind Dartige of his duty to his betrothed; as he was impatient to find himself alone with her, for to her alone could he reveal the truth.

Moreover, it seemed to him more than likely that Andrea had been on the side of the stage opposite the balcony where Clara had sung in the second act, and so had also caught sight of the Count de Listrac, whom she had plenty of time to scrutinize closely on the day he waylaid his wife near the square opposite the Théâtre-Lyrique.

He was not mistaken in this supposition; for, as soon as they were alone, she said to him:

“He is here; but, very fortunately, godmother has not seen him. But if he remains in that box—”

“He will remain there, and all is lost,” murmured Dartige, gloomily.

“If I were a man I would find a way to get him out of it.”



Dartige started violently; but he could not tell Andrea that he had just struck Listrac, and that they were to fight the next day.

"I tried to prevent him from entering it," he replied, almost sullenly; "but I failed, and my only hope now is that the countess will not look toward the accursed box."

"I, too, hope so. You have reassured her, and she may forget all about her husband now. I wish we could watch her, but that is impossible in this scene. The best we can do is to listen through the canvas that represents the walls of Friar Laurence's cell."

They did so, and heard the clear voice of the diva say, unfalteringly: "This is my chosen husband. Unite us, in the presence of Heaven."

It was evident that she had not yet perceived Listrac.

The scene continued without interruption, though Listrac fancied that her voice changed a little in the passage, "I swear to love him forever," and still more in the appeal, "Saviour, be thou my stay! Saviour, be thou my hope."

Still, this was not strange, as Juliet would naturally be greatly moved on receiving the benediction that unites her to Romeo.

Five minutes afterward Dartige and Andrea were obliged to beat a hasty retreat to avoid being seen by the audience.

They met Mme. de Listrac at the door of her dressing-room. It seemed to them that she was paler than usual, and that her eyes glittered strangely; but the smile returned to her lips as soon as she saw them.

"Heaven be praised!" thought Dartige. "She has not seen her husband, and she will not be likely to see him now."

Andrea furtively pressed the hand of her betrothed. She, too, felt reassured.

They were about to follow the diva into her dressing-room, but she turned to them, and said:

"Excuse me if I ask you to leave me quite alone until the end of this scene. I would like to look over my part in the great duet again. Besides, I have a fresh toilet to make. I must try on my bridal wreath and arrange my hair so that it will tumble down about my shoulders, just as I swoon. A true artist must attend to all these minor details herself."

Then, turning to Dartige, she added:

"I am cured, you see, and have become a coquette again. Now go to the greenroom, my friends; I will send for you before the commencement of the fourth act."

The lovers were obliged to comply with Mme. de Listrac's request, though they did so with evident reluctance.

"Why did godmother send us away?" asked the young girl, as they wended their way to the greenroom, which they found deserted, for all the members of the company, except the prima-donna, were on the stage.

"She told you why."

"But I am inclined to think that was only an excuse to get rid of us. Did you notice her eyes? Their expression changed entirely. Just now, in the marriage-scene, she stood directly opposite that woman's box; and I am almost sure that she saw her husband."

"If she did, we have cause to congratulate ourselves that she takes



the discovery so calmly. Her reason must have gained its ascendancy, and whispered that such an insult is worthy only of scorn."

"You do not know her. The more deeply she feels the more strenuously she endeavors to conceal her feelings. I tell you she is wounded to the heart."

A prey to the direst misgivings, Dartige and Andrea waited impatiently for the promised summons.

The third act ended, and all the preparations for the fourth act were completed before a call-boy came to announce that the diva was ready to see them.

They hastened to her dressing-room, and found her ready to go upon the stage, and perfectly calm, apparently, though very pale.

"I have kept you waiting a long time," she said gently. "Forgive me, as you would forgive me, I trust, for causing you much deeper annoyance. The present is a critical moment, for this act is to decide whether my return to the stage is a triumph or merely a success, so I naturally desired time to compose myself."

"Now, there is nothing left for me but to ask you to pray for me."

"Pray for you, godmother!" exclaimed Andrea; "why, we pray only for the dead or dying."

"You can pray for the audience to cover me with flowers. I have hit upon an entirely new effect, and I hope it will please my audience—the feminine portion of it, particularly."

"The curtain is about to rise, madame," announced the prompter.

"I am ready."

She left them, followed by an attendant bearing the bridal wreath which she was to place upon Juliet's head during the short interval between the scenes.

"How strangely godmother just spoke to us," murmured Andrea.

"She has seen her husband," replied Dartige. "This is no time to attempt to console her, however. We will try to reason with her after the performance."

"Come and listen to me when I sing the lark duet," Clara had said to them. "Between the scenes I shall have an opportunity to exchange a few words with you, if you do not leave the *coulisses*."

Dartige and his betrothed gladly accepted this invitation; and in a few moments they heard the perfect voice of the diva singing, "I have forgiven thee;" then came the great duet, "Must thou then go? It is not the lark, but the sweet nightingale—"

This was followed by the wildest applause, and cries of rapture from every part of the house, the fashionable audience casting aside all its usual reserve to manifest its enthusiastic admiration for this incomparable singer.

Such transports of delight had never before been witnessed within those walls; and when Romeo, who had also surpassed himself, descended from the balcony, the audience frantically insisted upon a repetition of the duet.

Juliet is left alone upon the stage only for a moment. Her father comes almost immediately to announce that Paris is waiting to conduct her to the altar; and as soon as he departs, Friar Laurence enters and presents her with the vial whose contents will produce a death-like slumber that will last at least twenty-four hours.



His deep bass voice resounded like one of those funereal chants that the Catholic Church has consecrated to the dead, and filled Andrea and her betrothed with a gloomy presentiment of approaching misfortune.

"What if it should really be a poison?" murmured the young girl, shuddering.

"Impossible," said Dartige with an assurance he did not feel. "The vial has not been out of the hands of the actor who personates Friar Laurence."

They could not see the stage, but they could hear the words Juliet speaks after draining the vial: "For you I yield up life," then the shrill whistle of the scene-shifter resounded, and they beat a hasty retreat.

There was a short intermission between this and the following scene; and Clara Monti joined them, according to promise. While her bridal wreath was being adjusted, she said, addressing Dartige:

"A strange desire to write to you seized me just now, my friend. The letter is on the toilet-table in my dressing-room. Go and get it and read it.

"Andrea, my child, kiss me. Oh, you need not be afraid of rubbing off my rouge now. It is right for me to be pale now, as I am about to swoon, you know. Give me your hand, Albert. May you be happy. Farewell."

"Farewell?" repeated Andrea uneasily. "Why do you not say *au revoir*?"

Clara made no reply. Capulet was waiting to lead the procession with her, and Friar Laurence, who was bringing up the rear, paused an instant as he passed to remark to Dartige:

"Our prima-donna is feeling far from well. Fortunately she has not much to do in this scene; but I don't know how she will get through with it, for she can scarcely stand."

Then he added, hastily, and in lower tones:

"If she has poisoned herself it is no fault of mine. When she pretended to drink the poison it was not my vial that she raised to her lips; besides, my vial was empty."

"To your place, to your place, my dear fellow," cried the prompter, pushing Friar Laurence forward. "Stand a little further back, if you please, young lady and gentleman."

They were obliged to obey, but they saw Juliet as she walked upon the stage led by her father, seat herself to receive the congratulations and flowers presented by the guests, who had been bidden to the marriage feast.

"It is true," muttered Dartige, overwhelmed with consternation. "She can scarcely hold herself erect; and it seemed to me just now that she tottered as she walked."

"Good heavens!" cried Andrea. "Can it be that what she raised to her lips, instead of the vial—was—"

"Was what?"

"A ring which she always wears, and which contains an almost instantaneous poison."

Just then Capulet assisted Juliet to rise in order to place her hand in that of her promised husband, Count Paris.



Clara Monti still had sufficient strength to loosen her bridal wreath, and her long black hair streamed down upon her shoulders.

Then, in a faint voice she said, rather than sung: "What darkness surrounds me—"

Then, after a long pause, "Is this death? I am afraid. My father, farewell," and falls into the arms of a bystander, while Capulet exclaims, "My daughter dead! Just heaven!"

All this was a part of the opera, and Clara Monti had enacted her rôle throughout with matchless power.

Never had such a natural death-scene been witnessed upon any stage, and the curtain fell to wild shouts of "Bravo!" and cries of "Monti, Monti!" from every side.

They were recalling her to give her an ovation such as no actress had ever received before from that critical and rather *blasé* audience.

But upon the stage, behind the curtain, there were equally frantic cries of "A physician, send for a physician!" and there was a horrified and excited crowd around Clara, who gave no sign of returning to life, and who had been placed in the arm-chair in which she had sat for an instant before yielding up her life.

Dartige could not realize that she was dead, and stood there as motionless as if turned to stone.

But Andrea had forced her way through the crowd and thrown herself upon the body of her benefactress, sobbing wildly, and kissing her ice-cold hands.

Every one was wild with horror; the Montagues, the Capulets, and even Romeo, who was sobbing like a child, for the great artiste had already won the affection of her companions.

Friar Laurence, the only person who seemed to have some of his wits about him, had rushed off in search of a physician, and soon returned with one.

He had probably disclosed his suspicions to the doctor, for immediately on his arrival, and even before he had examined the patient, the learned practitioner emphatically declared that this was a clear case of poisoning.

An examination confirmed this hasty diagnosis. The diva's heart had ceased to beat, and no moisture dimmed the mirror that was held to her lips. The silvery voice would never be heard again. Clara Monti was dead.

The physician wished to remove the fatal ring from the prima-donna's finger, but Dartige objected. Now that the poison had done its deadly work, what would be gained by analyzing it?

Andrea, still upon her knees, wept and moaned in the most heart-breaking manner, and the sad scene was rendered still more harrowing by the entrance of the unfortunate manager, who rushed in wringing his hands, and bewailing his unfortunate fate.

"Ruined, I am ruined!" he cried, wildly. "It is an outrage! An artiste who has made an engagement has no right to kill herself before fulfilling it! If she has any heirs, I shall demand damages of them."

"Monti! Monti!" yelled the impatient audience.

"They are calling her before the curtain," muttered the distracted *impresario*. "They do not even know that she is dead. They think



it only a part of the play, and want the fifth act, the awakening of Juliet, and a repetition of the famous lark duet. Ah well, you will not get it, you cormorants! The Monti is dead, and she will not come to life for you to shower bouquets upon her."

"It will be necessary to make some announcement, sir," suggested the director. "What shall I say to them?"

"You need not promise them the return of their money. They have had the worth of it. I even think you had better not tell them she is dead. They will hear the news soon enough. Announce that a sudden and very severe indisposition which has attacked our prima-donna, prevents her from thanking them in person for the very flattering reception they have accorded her, and from completing the performance."

"Very well; but I must first have the stage cleared."

But without waiting for his orders, four stalwart Capulets had already lifted the arm-chair in which George de Listrac's victim was sleeping her last sleep, and borne it away.

Andrea and Dartige followed the gloomy procession to Clara's dressing-room. There the physician laid the body upon a sofa, and sent away every one except the lovers, whom he took for relatives of the prima-donna.

The letter she had written to Dartige before poisoning herself was on the toilet-table. He put it in his pocket. This was no time to read it. He had to sustain and console Andrea, who was prostrated with grief; but as he thought of the cowardly scoundrel who had been the cause of Clara Monti's death, he muttered, under his breath:

"Rest in peace, noble woman! You shall be avenged!"

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## CHAPTER VIII.

WHILE Clara Monti was singing for the last time, and dying to the sound of enthusiastic applause, as a brave soldier dies at the hour of victory, other almost equally thrilling scenes were being enacted in the building.

The Baroness de Benserade had attended the performance that evening partly out of curiosity, and partly from a spirit of bravado. She wished to see if her rival's *début* would prove a victory or a failure; but she was, above all, anxious to prove that she was not afraid to show herself after the recent scandal of which she had been the heroine.

Everybody knew that the Countess de Listrac had returned to the stage only because her husband had left her to become the open admirer and acknowledged lover of a heartless and unscrupulous woman.

What every one did not know, however, was that Mme. de Benserade had supposed herself well rid of the handsome Listrac forever.

When her triumph over her hated rival became assured, she began to tire of her victim, especially when she found that his financial reverses made him anything but an eligible *parti* for a woman of her extravagant habits.

Frequent quarrels were the natural result of this growing dissatisfaction on her part; but George clung to the baroness as a drowning



man clings to the branch that bends beneath his weight, and knowing her nature, he carefully abstained from speaking of his losses at the card-table or in speculation, being well aware that she had no fondness for impoverished men.

M. de Moulieres took good care to keep her fully informed, however, and she secretly resolved to be patient, and not to break with George so long as there was any chance of his retrieving his fortunes, for she really loved him as well as it was in her nature to love any one—but to promptly sever all relations with him as soon as he found himself without either resources or credit.

Such was the state of affairs when, a few days before the first performance of *Romeo*, the count called on Mme. de Benserade to announce that he was about to make a short visit to London, in order that he might not be in Paris on the night of his wife's *début* at the *Théâtre-Lyrique*.

Of his recent losses at baccarat, and of his pecuniary embarrassment generally, he said never a word. He had his plans, but he did not think it advisable to confide them to her.

He would have lost nothing by telling her the truth, however, as she was thoroughly acquainted with the situation, thanks to Moulieres; but as she was naturally rather kind-hearted, she had bidden her George a tender farewell, without allowing him to suspect that she was perfectly resigned to never seeing him again.

She had even carried dissimulation so far as to ask him if he had any objections to her taking a box for Clara Monti's first appearance, and he had answered by hiring the box for her himself.

As George was to leave for England the following day, she had offered seats in this box to three gentlemen acquaintances, one of whom was Moulieres.

The latter was now rapidly nearing the goal at which he had been aiming for the past three months, for what better could the Baroness de Benserade do after her rupture with Listrac than to marry her old suitor Raoul de Moulieres? It was certainly her best available means of retrieving her reputation, and regaining her footing in society, after the late unfortunate scandal connected with her name.

Moulieres saw plainly enough that she was not very strongly inclined to take advantage of this opportunity; but he felt confident that he should be able to persuade her to do so by convincing her that they were made for each other; and in this he was quite right.

Thinking that the first performance of "*Romeo and Juliet*" would afford him an excellent opportunity to press his suit, he had resolved to profit by it, and he was consequently very disagreeably surprised when he saw Listrac enter the box before the conclusion of the first act, as tranquilly and smilingly as if nothing had happened, and quietly take possession of the chair one of the other gentlemen relinquished to him. It was next to that of the baroness, who knew not what to think of this unexpected return, and Moulieres was equally in the dark.

"You were not expecting me, I see," remarked Listrac, gazing at her with annoying persistency. "One would suppose that you were under the impression that I had gone away for good.

"Here I am, however," he continued, with a light laugh, "and, knowing that I should find you here, I did not take the trouble to



write to you announcing my arrival. Besides, I did not decide to return until the last moment. Then both the wind and the sea combined against me, but I reached Paris at last, and do not feel the slightest desire to leave it again."

The baroness and Moulières exchanged furtive glances. They wondered if Listrac had lost his senses entirely.

"How strangely luck changes," the count continued. "Would you believe it, I had scarcely reached London before I met one of my friends, a member of the House of Lords, and of all the fashionable clubs. He took me with him to the Army and Navy Club that same evening, where I won two thousand guineas at whist. The next day, I did still better. Baccarat has not yet become a popular game on the other side of the Channel, but I met a few amateurs, and I had an ample revenge for the injuries the cruel Pole inflicted upon me in Paris. I return laden with gold.

"It was this good fortune that decided me to come here this evening," added George, carelessly. "I owe my wife no further consideration, as she has returned to the stage—"

"With your permission, I suppose?" interrupted Moulières.

"Why should I oppose her return?" replied Listrac, evasively. "We no longer have anything in common, she and I. I hope, however, that after her *début* here—which seems to be a great success, by the way—she will have the good taste to confine her performances to foreign lands. In the meantime, I must adopt a new mode of life, and I propose to act henceforth, as if I had never been the husband of this prima-donna. Still, I would prefer that no one should see me in this box this evening. People might suppose that I had come merely to annoy the *débutante*, while my only object was to invite you to take supper with me after the performance. I want to celebrate my late victory on the other side of the Channel with you."

"As you please," replied Mme. de Benserade.

"Hum! you do not appear very enthusiastic."

"You are very much mistaken. I am delighted to see you again."

"One would not think so."

"I can not throw my arms around your neck in the presence of all these spectators."

"I do not ask for any demonstrations of that kind. I only wish to be assured of your love. I will now give you time to recover from the astonishment my return must have caused you, for I stopped here on my way from the railway station, and a groom I brought with me from England is waiting for me in a carriage, with my trunks. I must go and tell him to procure apartments for me in the same house in which I had rooms before my departure, and in which I shall remain until I can find a house that suits me. I will see you again in a few moments."

As he spoke, Listrac rose and left the box without waiting for any reply from the baroness, who was not a little perplexed.

Moulières had heard none of this conversation, it having been carried on in very subdued tones, and he was anxious to ask Mme. de Benserade what she thought of this unexpected return; but he was not alone with her, so he contented himself with asking, in a whispered aside:



"He is coming back, is he not?"

"Yes, in an instant."

"I should advise you not to wait for his return."

"Impossible! that would look as if I were afraid of him."

"What difference does that make? He would understand that you did not care to renew your engagement to him."

"I have not decided to break it yet."

"Simply because you believe this story of fabulous gains within the past four days. I myself do not believe a word of it."

"If George had not won a great deal of money he would not have returned."

"But even admitting that he has, he will not keep it long," replied Moulières; "and you will make a great mistake if you renew your relations with him."

Mme. de Benserade, instead of replying, turned and entered into an animated conversation with the other gentlemen. This conversation was soon interrupted, however, by the entrance of the count, who burst into the box like a madman, and threw himself into a chair beside the baroness.

"What is the matter?" she asked, anxiously.

"I have just been struck in the face by a scoundrel whom my wife doubtless stationed in the corridor to insult me. I shall challenge him. Moulières, my dear fellow, will you do me the favor to call upon Monsieur Dartige for me to-morrow morning?"

"A duel?" exclaimed Juliette.

"Yes, a duel, and a duel to the death. Oh, no sentimental demonstrations, I beg! I have received a blow, and I have no intention of swallowing the affront. If I am killed, you will soon forget me, and that will be the end of it all. If I kill my opponent, my wife will do all the mourning. Let us talk of something else."

"Listrac is right," said Moulières. "This insult is too great to be overlooked, and I will cheerfully serve as his second."

In his secret heart Moulières was jubilant, though he assumed the grave and anxious air suited to the occasion. Dartige would perhaps rid him of this Listrac, who could be of no further use to him, and who was even to be feared, as he seemed likely to regain possession of the baroness' heart.

She was silent, but one could see that she was deeply agitated. George had taken a seat in the front of the box, apparently forgetting that his wife would soon reappear upon the stage, for the second act was just beginning. He surveyed the audience with eyes that flashed with anger. One would almost have thought that he took pleasure in thus displaying himself, and in braving the disapproval of this audience composed almost entirely of persons of his own rank in life.

It was not until she knelt to receive the benediction of Friar Laurence that Clara saw him. Then their eyes met. There was a slight tremor in her voice, and that was all.

Juliet does not appear in the next scene, and the act ended without any other incident of importance; but five minutes after the lowering of the curtain, some one rapped at the door of the box.

Moulières had only to reach out his arm to open it. He did so,



and was not surprised to find himself face to face with M. Chantal. He knew the object of his visit, and was entirely prepared for it.

"I am at your service, sir," said he, stepping out into the corridor.

He was immediately followed by the Count de Listrac, and it was the latter who opened the conversation.

"Sir," he began, "I thank you for hastening the conference we must have together, for I suppose you come on behalf of Monsieur Dartige?"

Receiving a bow by way of response, he continued:

"Monsieur Dartige has insulted me so grossly that he must submit to my conditions, which are as follows: We will fight to-morrow, with pistols, at twenty paces, with the privilege of advancing five paces after the first fire, and then continue firing until one of us is *hors de combat*. As to the time and place of the meeting, you can confer with my second, here; my only stipulation being that the duel shall take place before noon."

"That is the same desire my friend expressed," replied Chantal, "and if your second will drop in at the club after the opera, he will find Monsieur Dartige there."

"I will go there immediately after the performance," said Moulieres.

"I shall count upon seeing you there. Good-evening," said Chantal, turning on his heel.

Listrac made no attempt to detain him, but whispered to his companion, as he turned to re-enter the box,

"Not a word to Madame de Benserade."

"Of course I shall not tell her that the duel is to come off to-morrow, but I fear she already suspects it."

"I will reassure her, and as I may not have another opportunity to speak to you on the subject, I will be at your rooms to-morrow at nine o'clock precisely, in fighting trim, and then there will be nothing left for us to do but to take a carriage and repair to the dueling ground."

"As you please."

On re-entering the box, they found the lady very calm. She did not appear to suspect that they had just decided upon fighting in the morning, and Listrac had no difficulty in explaining his short absence.

"It was only a friend who had caught sight of me and wished to congratulate me upon my return."

Mme. de Benserade asked no further questions; besides, the act was beginning, and there was no more time to talk. Clara Monti was singing with Romeo: *Nuit d'hyménée, ô douce nuit d'amour*, and never had her acting been more spirited. Her voice did not tremble, and her eyes never once turned to the box in which the count had resumed his former seat.

Emboldened by the apparent indifference of his victim, he made no further attempt to conceal himself, but frequently leaned over to whisper to the baroness, who had audaciously lowered the screen she had kept raised during the preceding act. This was the state of affairs when Clara Monti took the vial from the friar's hands; and, before raising it to her lips, after the monk asked: "Do you



hesitate?" she gave Listrac a look, a single look that made him cower.

Then she drank.

"One would think she was drinking to your health," sneered Mme. de Benserade, who had noticed the glance.

Moulieres frowned, for he thought it most unseemly for her to jest in this way. Listrac did not reply to the ill-timed pleasantry, and an oppressive silence reigned in the box.

Almost immediately, the scene changes, and Juliet reappears, followed by the wedding guests. A great change was apparent in her expression, and her pallor was frightful. Listrac instinctively felt that she was wounded to the heart.

The scene that precedes the swoon is short, and Clara soon fell, apparently lifeless, into the arms of one of her relatives. A thrill ran through the audience, and the curtain fell to the sound of voices vehemently recalling the great cantatrice.

"Her acting is even better than her singing," exclaimed the baroness, moved with involuntary admiration. "The fact is, she dies to perfection. One would almost be willing to swear that it was the real thing."

Then, drawing a little closer to George, she whispered:

"And if it were, I could marry you."

Moulieres heard the remark, and bit his lips.

"We will soon see that the diva is alive!" he muttered. "The audience is so frantic with enthusiasm that she will be obliged to reappear."

Still, the curtain did not rise, though the storm of applause burst forth again and again. This delay only made the audience still more persistent, however.

The curtain did rise at last, but instead of Juliet, led by Romeo, the excited audience beheld only a gentleman dressed in black. He wore a white cravat, and his face was as white as his cravat.

"An announcement!" murmured Mme. de Benserade. "Clara Monti has probably sent him to tell us that she is too tired to show herself. She thinks it would be beneath her dignity to return to pick up the flowers that would be showered upon her."

"Will you be quiet?" said Listrac, almost rudely.

"Ladies and gentlemen," began the stage-director, in a voice that trembled perceptibly.

"Monti! Monti!" interrupted several of the more obstinate.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am grieved to announce that the great artiste whom you have just applauded—"

The worthy man paused. He was so deeply agitated that he had been on the point of adding: for the last time, but the frantic *impresario* had forbidden him to disclose the whole truth, so he stammeringly resumed:

"Madame Clara Monti has just met with an accident—"

Exclamations of regret resounded on all sides.

"An accident which will undoubtedly prove very serious in its consequences. She is unable to reappear before you, and the manager finds himself under the painful necessity of stopping the performance."



"Oh!" cried a few spectators, mindful of their money, only a few, however.

"The management respectfully request the audience to retire, and will make to-morrow such arrangements as may be necessitated by this deplorable event."

There was general consternation. No one thought of finding fault, though many would have been glad to ask an explanation. But it was too late. The curtain had fallen.

"I can't imagine what this means," murmured the baroness.

"Nor can I," replied Moulieres, "but I think we had better leave immediately, if we wish to escape the crowd."

Listrac offered his arm to Mme. de Benserade, who scarcely took time to wrap her fur-lined cloak around her.

They reached the outer door without much difficulty, though not without hearing some rather disagreeable remarks—and lost no time in summoning the lady's coupé which was in waiting on the quai. The baroness and her escort went in search of it themselves after taking a hasty leave of Moulieres, who whispered:

"I shall be ready and waiting to-morrow, at nine o'clock."

That gentleman lingered awhile, in the hope of learning the nature of the accident which had befallen the prima-donna; but there was such a terrible crowd that no one seemed inclined to stop to talk; besides, they knew no more about the event that had interrupted the performance than Moulieres did, so he finally took a carriage, and ordered the coachman to drive him to the club, where he seated himself on a sofa directly opposite the door of the principal *salon*, where he could not fail to see M. Chantal when he came in.

About a quarter of an hour afterward Dartige's friend appeared. He saw Moulieres, who rose and advanced to meet him, but instead of entering into conversation with him upon the subject that had brought them to the club, he said coldly:

"We can decide nothing without Monsieur Dartige, and he will probably be detained at the theater. But he will not fail to come. I shall wait for him, and you had better do the same."

Whereupon, Chantal turned upon his heel, and walked into the next room, without paying any further attention to M. de Listrac's second.

Smarting under this rebuff, Moulieres returned to his seat, where he remained alone and unnoticed. He was evidently in high disfavor, for the members of the club who were now dropping in, one after another, pretended not to see him, or passed him without the slightest sign of recognition.

He was not deprived of the satisfaction of listening, however, for groups of new-comers were beginning to form around the fire-place, and a lively discussion was going on.

In such a company, the affair at the Théâtre-Lyrique was not likely to escape comment. The first comers stated only what Moulieres already knew; but they did not hesitate to declare that the conduct of the Count de Listrac was outrageous, though they had not the slightest suspicion that it had been the cause of the accident which had interrupted the performance, and there was strong talk of calling a meeting of the directors for the purpose of expelling Listrac from the club.



Moulières did not venture to interfere, but closing his eyes, assumed the attitude of one who sleeps to the monotonous hum of conversation in which he takes no interest. No one thought of troubling his slumber, for though nothing had been said upon the subject, all were tacitly resolved to snub the friend and supposed champion of the diva's husband.

He had been tolerated, and even made much of for several years, merely because he was good company, but suddenly, every one had come to the conclusion that the man was an adventurer.

A single unfortunate step had sufficed to precipitate him into the lowest depths of obloquy, for so things go in Paris, in the circles where one amuses one's self.

The talkers finally dispersed, some wending their way to the bacarat-room, others to the restaurant to finish the night there.

Moulières was left entirely alone, and finally fell asleep in good earnest, in spite of his anxiety. Even the great Conde slept on the eve of the battle of Rocroy, it is said. Chantal did not fall asleep, however. He could not keep still, but wandered restlessly about, from room to room, and finally out into the hall, through which every one who entered the club-house must pass: but he saw nothing of Dartige.

He certainly could not have forgotten the appointment, and however dangerously ill Mme. de Listrac might be, Dartige would not be detained at her house all night. What, then, could detain him? Chantal tried in vain to conjecture, without once suspecting the sad truth.

By two o'clock in the morning, the last remnant of patience had deserted him, and he was about to leave the club-house, when Dartige appeared at the end of the hall which his friend had been pacing feverishly for nearly three hours.

"Well?" asked Chantal.

"Dead!" replied Dartige, gloomily.

"What! dead? One does not die from a fainting fit."

"She poisoned herself."

"Good heavens! with what?"

"With some poison which she carried in a ring, and which was almost instantaneous in its effect. She died on the stage."

"My poor friend! what a position for you! What did you do?"

"I have had the body placed in the manager's private office. They would have refused to receive it in the house where she was living. It will remain there until the day of burial. The theater will be closed after this catastrophe, and the manager counts upon making a sensation by reopening it for the funeral of the Countess de Listrac."

"All Paris will attend it. It will be the talk of the town. But are you sure that she did it intentionally?"

"She wrote me a letter explaining the cause of her resolve before poisoning herself. It was not necessary, however, for I knew."

"It was the sight of her husband that killed her, was it not?"

"As certainly as if he had stabbed her to the heart. The wretch murdered her."

"Then the duel will not take place. A gentleman does not fight with an assassin."



"I shall fight with him, however. I have sworn to avenge Clara Monti. I must and shall kill him."

"Unless he kills you."

"No, God will protect me. To-morrow morning I shall rid the earth of this scoundrel, and to-morrow evening I shall leave for Italy with my wife."

"The young Italian! You persist in marrying her then?"

"I love her, and in marrying her I shall fulfill the last wish of the noble woman who has just sacrificed her life to a misplaced love. In her letter, she intrusted Andrea to my care, and bequeathed to her all she possessed. I shall refuse the money, but her other wishes shall be scrupulously obeyed."

"Well, you are right," said Chantal, deeply moved, "and I swear that if you should be unfortunate to-morrow, the woman you love shall still have a friend. Where did you leave her?"

"She is watching over the dead body of Clara Monti. I shall not see her again until after the duel."

"Does she know that you are going to fight?"

"I took good care not to tell her, but she may suspect it—she is wonderfully clear-sighted—so I want to have it over as soon as possible."

"There is nothing to prevent it, Listrac's second is here now."

"Moulieres, I suppose, you mean?"

"Yes. I would much rather have nothing to do with such a rascal, but Listrac, I am sure, could find no one else to assist him, and I think he has given him full authority to act for him. We can make all the necessary arrangements to-night."

"I am glad of it. So far as I am concerned, I too give you *carte blanche*."

"The interview need not be a lengthy one, as I already know Listrac's conditions—pistols, at twenty paces, with the privilege of advancing five paces, and firing until death or a serious wound ensues."

"That suits me."

"Then wait for me here. It is not necessary for you to have anything to say to Moulieres. I will be back in ten minutes."

Chantal entered the *salon* just as Moulieres, who had woke only a moment before, was starting out in search of him.

"I have just seen Dartige," said Chantal. "He accepts Monsieur de Listrac's conditions, and thinks we can dispense with other seconds. Consequently there is nothing for us to do but decide upon the time and place."

"Monsieur de Listrac will be at my rooms to-morrow morning at nine o'clock. The duel had better take place at eleven o'clock, on the shores of the lake at Ville d'Avray. I know a suitable place in the forest near there."

"Agreed. Will you bring your pistols? I will bring mine. We can draw lots for them on the ground."

"Very well. May I venture to inquire, sir, if the illness of the countess is very serious in its nature?"

Chantal hesitated an instant, then looking the questioner full in the face, replied:



"The Countess de Listrac is dead, and I trust that to-morrow her death will be avenged."

And turning abruptly away he rejoined Dartige.

"I too hope so," muttered Moulieres. "You may rest assured that I shall do nothing to defer the duel. I do not want the baroness to have time to learn that Listrac is a widower."

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## CHAPTER IX.

ANDREA had not given way after the catastrophe. She had indulged in no hysterics, and had wept but little. Deep grief is always silent. But she had absolutely refused to leave Clara Monti's body, and the next morning it was necessary for the manager to exert his authority to compel her to go home and take a little rest.

On leaving her some time after midnight, Dartige had made her promise to return to the house on the Quai Voltaire, about nine o'clock the following morning, and there await his coming.

His only object in doing this had been to insure her the rest she so much needed, for he intended to devote his morning to killing M. de Listrac, and not to see his betrothed again until after the duel. All his preparations had been made, and a farewell letter written, which, with Clara Monti's will, was to be given to Andrea, by his second, in case of his death.

After the interview with Moulieres, Chantal and Dartige had held a long conference, and Chantal knew what he must do for Andrea in the event of his friend's demise. In short, he was to see that Mme. de Listrac's will was duly executed, and make the necessary arrangements for the orphan's return to Italy.

At the same time they made the final arrangements for the duel. The easiest way to reach the spot selected for the meeting was to take the train that leaves the Saint Lazare station at half-past ten o'clock, and the two friends had agreed to meet in the waiting-room of the depot at quarter past ten.

Dartige, who had not slept at all, having spent the few remaining hours of the night in waiting, sent his valet out about half-past nine for a carriage, and a few minutes afterward started down-stairs on his way to the station.

He was greatly surprised, and even more greatly annoyed to meet Andrea on the staircase.

"You here," he exclaimed. "I asked you to wait at home for me."

"That is true," replied the young girl, "but I could not stay there. I was impatient to see you, so I came here. Have I done wrong?"

"No, certainly not. Only I am obliged to go out now. An unforeseen business matter compels me to leave the city, and will require my attention all the rest of the morning."

"A business matter at a time like this?"

"Yes, it is absolutely necessary for me to see Madame de Listrac's notary, and he is at his country residence on the Versailles railroad."

The pretext was a very poor one, but Dartige, in his surprise and agitation, could invent no better one.



"Is it far from here?" asked Andrea.

"Far enough for me to be obliged to go by rail. The carriage you saw at the door is to take me to the station."

"Will you allow me to drive there with you. The same carriage can take me home again afterward. I can at least be with you for a little while, and since godmother died I really have not courage to remain alone."

Dartige was on the point of refusing, but what excuse could he give for this refusal? Andrea, who was so soon to be his wife, certainly had a right to accompany him to the station, and if he should send her away without any explanation, she would be almost certain to suspect the truth. Would it not be better to try to deceive her by acceding to her request? Besides, Dartige knew that this duel might prove fatal to him. Why then should he deprive himself of the happiness of spending a few moments with the woman whom he adored, and whom he would perhaps never see again."

"I wish you could be with me always," he said, finally. "But this notary would be surprised to see you."

"Oh, it would not be necessary for him to see me. I might wait for you at the station to which you are going."

"That would be impossible. I am going to Ville d'Avray, and Monsieur Jouin's villa is a long way from the station. We must separate at Saint Lazare."

"As you think best," replied the girl, without betraying the slightest suspicion.

Nevertheless, the name of the station to which Dartige was going was indelibly engraved upon her memory.

The drive from the Rue de Bourgogne to the Place du Havre was gloomy and almost silent. Dartige vainly endeavored to find a topic of conversation that would conceal the emotion excited by the thought that his unworthy antagonist's bullet might bring his dreams of future happiness to an abrupt termination; and Andrea became more and more deeply absorbed in gloomy reflections.

They had not exchanged a dozen sentences when the carriage drew up at the foot of the broad steps leading to the waiting-room.

Chantal was waiting for his friend on the topmost step, and M. de Listrac, accompanied by his second, was just passing through the covered gallery that borders one side of the court-yard.

Andrea recognized him instantly, and the meaning of his presence there instantly flashed across her mind. Almost any other woman would have treated Dartige to a scene, but she only said, quietly:

"May God preserve you!"

Dartige was anxious to have the parting over as soon as possible, so he kissed the hand Andrea extended, leaped from the carriage, and paid the driver, first giving him the number of the house on the Quai Voltaire, however.

The coachman immediately drove off, for carriages are not allowed to stand there over a certain length of time, and Dartige did not look round to see if the vehicle stopped again before it left the court yard, but ran hastily up the steps to join Chantal, who said by way of greeting:

"You and your adversary make your appearance at the same mo-



ment. He seems to prefer to travel by rail as well as ourselves. Still, that is no reason why we should be shut up in the same compartment."

"Certainly not. I hope I shall not be obliged to bow to him until we meet on the dueling-ground."

"So do I. The only trouble is that the place selected is a long way from the station. We shall have to hurry out as soon as the train stops if we want to secure a carriage. They are rare there, and we must try to be the first to engage one."

"We will. Have you the pistols?"

"Yes, some brand new ones. I purchased them this morning with the box you see in my hand. Now I will go and buy the tickets—first-class ones—but not to go and return—that would bring us bad luck."

Listrac and Moulières entered the waiting-room a few moments afterward, but seeing Chantal in the long procession already formed in front of the ticket office, they waited until the train was nearly ready to start, and Chantal and Dartige had gone out before they went up to purchase their tickets, which they did without noticing a veiled lady, dressed in black, who seemed to govern her movements by theirs.

"We had better have driven out to Ville d'Avray," remarked Moulières. "It would have spared us the annoyance of being obliged to travel in the same train with these gentlemen."

"I did not think of it," replied Listrac, "but we will find means to secure a different compartment."

"Moreover, to get there in time we should have been obliged to start at a very early hour," remarked Moulières, "and you reached my rooms scarcely twenty minutes ago. Confess that it was the baroness who caused you to so nearly miss your appointment."

"Yes. She was trying to pick a quarrel with me."

"About what?"

"She pretends that she is jealous of my wife."

"I should think she need feel no apprehensions on that score after your conduct last evening. Everybody at the club was talking about it."

"And they blamed me, I suppose?"

"Yes. I must admit it."

"Well, I can't say that I care very much. I have about made up my mind to leave Paris. In fact, I shall probably be compelled to do so, for if I should kill Dartige, there will be an investigation; and I shall certainly kill him, for I am a dead-shot, as you know."

"Yes, I have seen you hit the bull's-eye three times out of four; but in a duel it is very different."

"Do you think I am afraid?"

"No, but it seems to me that you are a trifle nervous this morning."

"I am a trifle annoyed, but all that will soon pass off. Have you heard anything from the diva? What did they say about the interrupted performance at the club?"

"Nothing that you have not heard already; but I presume Monsieur Dartige is better informed."



"I certainly shall not apply to him for information," replied Listrac, curtly. "Let us go aboard. It is time for the train to start."

"He has heard nothing, and I am glad of it," thought Moulieres.

They passed through the gate, and the veiled lady followed them.

Convinced that Dartige intended to fight, Andrea had resolved to witness the combat, and not to survive her betrothed, if he fell. The idea of preventing the duel never once occurred to her; besides, she firmly believed that divine justice would avenge Clara Monti's death.

Following Listrac and his second into the compartment they selected, she seated herself beside the former, in the hope that their conversation would indicate how she could follow them without attracting their attention, after they reached Ville d'Avray.

M. de Listrac did not seem to be aware of her presence. From time to time, he addressed a few words to Moulieres who answered him rather briefly, but their conversation was confined to the most trivial topics. It was not until the train had passed Suresnes that the count remarked to his second:

"You were in Florence about fifteen years ago, were you not? Yes? Then you must have heard of the death of an Italian artist, named Vitellio."

"Certainly. He came to an untimely end. He was too great a favorite with the ladies."

"Then you think he was killed by a rival?"

"I am almost certain of it. Such cases are of frequent occurrence in that country."

"Did any one know this rival's name?"

"Rumor said that he was a Frenchman, but no one was sure of it. I think, however, that very little attempt was made to discover the murderer."

"Do you know what became of this Vitellio's daughter?"

"Your opponent can tell you all you want to know about her. He is going to marry her, I hear."

"If his life is spared," said Listrac, with a sardonic smile.

Just then, the train passed through the tunnel under the park at Saint Cloud, and the conversation necessarily ceased.

Andrea had not missed a single word of it, and a terrible suspicion flashed through her mind. She had heard it said that her father had been assassinated by a Frenchman, and she asked herself if this Frenchman was not the man sitting opposite her. Her grandmother, before her departure for Paris, had shown her a letter which Vitale Vitellio had received a few hours before his death, an anonymous letter written in French, by a person who requested the artist to meet him at midnight on the Quai de l'Arno, and this person was undoubtedly the assassin.

"Perhaps we shall never meet again," her grandmother had said to her; "I am old, and I may not live until your return. Keep this proof of the trap that a scoundrel set for your father, and make use of it, if possible, to bring the wretch to justice, if you should ever be brought in contact with him."

Andrea always carried this important letter upon her person, but this was no time to demand a comparison of handwritings; she re-



solved to consult Dartige after the duel, however, and to beg him to aid her in the discovery of her father's murderer.

The train stopped again, a few moments afterward, and the two accomplices hastily left the car.

Andrea allowed them to pass her, and did not alight herself until Dartige and Chantal, who had traveled in another car, had ascended the staircase leading to the suspension bridge over which passengers from Paris are obliged to pass.

An omnibus and five or six carriages were standing outside the depot. The new arrivals were not very numerous, and they all directed their steps toward the omnibus; at least, all except the four gentlemen, who had already driven off, in two shabby open carriages.

Andrea saw an old coupé standing near by, and walking up to it, she said to the coachman:

"Can your horse keep up with those carriages?"

"He can pass them, if you like, my little lady," replied the man.

"Those gentlemen seem to be going to take breakfast at Father Cabassut's inn, and we can reach there before they do if you wish."

"That is not what I want," replied Andrea, hastily. "We are only to follow them, without trying to overtake them, and to stop when they stop."

"I understand, my little lady. Jump in. They are some distance ahead of us now; but I have an idea that we sha'n't be obliged to go very far."

The coachman was right. The lake is only about ten minutes' drive from the railway station, and as the narrow road leading to it winds along through the forest, there was nothing to interfere with Andrea's plan. The shrewd coachman finally paused before passing the corner of a high wall that surrounded an immense park, jumped down from the box, opened the door, and asked:

"It is a duel that you want to prevent, is it not?"

Andrea attempted to deny it, but he replied, laughing:

"Oh, I know. They have their pistols, and this is not the first time Parisians have come out here to fight. Don't be afraid, they are not likely to do each other much damage, and they will probably wind up the affair by breakfasting together at Father Cabassut's."

"Besides, if you are anxious to reconcile them before they can possibly do each other any injury, I will tell you how you can join them just at the right moment. I know where they are going, for there is only one good place for such a meeting, and that is at the other end of the pond. If they take the road to the left, you take the one to the right, and you will reach the clearing as soon as they do, and can pounce down upon them just as they are going to fire."

"Still, an easier and, perhaps, surer way would be to summon the gendarmes. The barracks are not far from here, and if you wish—"

"No, no, that is not necessary. Wait for me here, so you can take me back to the station. Here are twenty francs for your trouble."

"Thank you, my little lady. If you'll pay me at that rate I'll wait for you all day."

Andrea hastened on. As soon as she passed the corner of the



wall, she saw the two carriages standing near the edge of the pond whose waters sparkled brightly in the March sunlight.

The vehicles were empty, however, and the two coachmen stood chatting sociably as they smoked their pipes.

After passing the carriages, she caught a glimpse of the four gentlemen who had taken the path to the left. Andrea, accordingly, turned to the right, passing the garden of a restaurant where the combatants might, indeed, have breakfasted, had the affair been less serious.

The spot to which Moulieres conducted the party was certainly admirably adopted to duelling purposes. It was a long, narrow clearing, surrounded on every side by trees and underbrush, sufficiently tall to screen it effectually from the eyes of any one who might be passing along the public road.

The ground which was covered with a thick carpet of turf, was perfectly level and unbroken by either tree or shrub. Listrac and Moulieres, being the first to arrive, quietly awaited the approach of the others. Cold bows were interchanged, and then the two principals walked a short distance away, leaving the two seconds to make the final arrangements.

"Here are the pistols I purchased," began Chantal, opening the case. "Will you satisfy yourself that they have never been used, and show me yours."

"They are exactly like yours," replied Moulieres, producing them. "I purchased them at the same shop yours came from, and only about a quarter of an hour afterward, they told me. You can see that they are perfectly new. I think it would be best for us to load both pairs."

"What do you mean?"

"As it is decided that the gentlemen will not be limited to a shot a piece, we had better load all four pistols. You can load mine, and I will load yours, and then each gentleman can choose his weapon from under a handkerchief."

"That arrangement is perfectly satisfactory to me. It is agreed that the combatants are to be stationed twenty paces apart, is it not?"

"With the privilege of advancing five paces each."

"Which would reduce the distance to ten paces. I refuse to consent to this arrangement."

"Monsieur Dartige has consented to it."

"He is at perfect liberty to do so, of course, if he chooses, but I will not act as second in a duel which would be nothing more nor less than a cold-blooded murder."

"And I will not consent to a duel where the firing is to be done at the word of command," interposed Listrac, for the principals had not gone out of hearing distance. "Under such circumstances, one almost invariably misses, and heaven only knows how often it is necessary to begin again. I did not come here to waste powder, and as I am the aggrieved party, I have a right to insist that the firing shall be done at will."

"As you please," said Dartige promptly.

"So be it," said Chantal. "These gentlemen are to fire when they please, but they are to be stationed thirty paces apart, with the privi-



lege of advancing to within twenty paces of each other. That is the only concession I will make."

"I am content with that," replied Listrac, "but let us have the affair over as soon as possible."

Chantal glanced inquiringly at his friend, who ratified the arrangement by a nod of acquiescence, whereupon the principals proceeded to load the pistols, after which they were laid on the ground and covered with Mouliere's pocket-handkerchief.

The next thing to be done was to measure off the distance, and Chantal was careful to take long steps in order to lessen the danger as much as possible.

During these preparations the two principals stood perfectly motionless, a few feet from each other, without exchanging a word or a look.

When the task was ended, the seconds rejoined them, and Chantal said:

"We are ready, gentlemen. You can now choose your pistols, first removing your overcoats, of course."

Dartige removed his immediately, and threw it on the grass, but Listrac asked, rather curtly:

"What is the use of that ceremony, pray?"

"It is merely the custom, just as it is customary to fight in one's shirt sleeves when the sword is the weapon selected. A heavy overcoat serves as a sort of cuirass; and more than once the life of a combatant has been saved by the thickness of his clothing. Besides, you see that your opponent has not made the slightest objection to removing his."

"Very well. Here goes mine," said Listrac, throwing his overcoat on the grass beside that of Dartige. "Is that all?"

"No," replied Chantal coldly. "There seems to be a rather bulky article in the breast-pocket of your other coat."

"It is my pocket-book. Are you going to require me to lay that aside, also?"

"Yes, certainly. The code is explicit on this subject. A combatant must retain upon his person no pocket-book, newspapers, documents, or coins; in short, nothing that could arrest the progress of a bullet.

"Your opponent has complied with this rule. Your second can satisfy himself that he has not even a watch in his pocket."

Listrac drew a plethoric wallet from his coat-pocket, and threw it down beside his overcoat. A pocket-book that he took from his trousers pocket quickly followed it; then he turned to Chantal and said, dryly:

"That is all, I think."

"Yes, sir. Now will you choose one of the pistols under this handkerchief.

"It is now your turn, Dartige," continued Chantal, when M. de Listrac had selected his weapon.

Dartige chose his, after which, each of the two seconds took one of the two remaining pistols.

"Shall I give the signal?" asked Chantal.

"Yes," replied Listrac and Moulieres in the same breath.

"Then I warn you that I shall not say 'One, two, three,' as I



should do if you were to fire at the word of command. I shall simply say, 'Fire at will.' And as soon as I have uttered the words, each of you will have a right to fire at your pleasure."

"That is understood," interrupted Listrac. "Now let us take our places."

"One last remark, gentlemen. Should death or a serious wound ensue, the combat will necessarily cease; and afterward each side must look out for itself. Monsieur de Moulieres will give his attention to Monsieur de Listrac, and I shall devote mine to my friend. This is not a duel which is likely to end in a reconciliation, so the survivor will leave with his second, without troubling himself about his dead or wounded opponent."

"You seem to think of everything, sir," said the count, ironically.

"I think that we ought to have brought a physician!" exclaimed Moulieres.

"If one should be needed, he can be found in Ville d'Avray," replied Chantal. "We must also pledge ourselves not to disclose the cause of this duel in case of an investigation."

"It will become known whether we disclose it or not," replied Moulieres.

"Why? There was no one in the corridor when Monsieur de Listrac was struck. No one knows that the gentlemen intend to fight this morning, and no one need ever know it, for there is nothing to prevent—"

"I understand," interrupted Listrac. "Your friend expects to kill me; and he would like to keep the matter a secret in order that he may be able to marry my widow without creating a scandal."

"Cease this most unseemly jesting. Do you pretend to be ignorant that Clara Monti, Countess de Listrac, is dead? Such an exhibition of heartlessness is unpardonable, even indecent. Will you take your place?"

As he spoke, Chantal slipped his arm through that of Dartige, and led him away. As Moulieres, in his turn, escorted Listrac to his place, the latter said to him:

"Is it true that my wife is dead?"

"Alas! yes. She died on the stage last evening. I thought it best to conceal the fact from you."

"You did very wrong. I am free now, and I never before felt such a strong desire to live. I am going to aim carefully, and I shall kill my man at the first shot."

Chantal looked at the two opponents closely, to assure himself that all the regulations of the dueling code had been scrupulously complied with.

They had both assumed the prescribed attitude—the right shoulder to the front, the barrel of the pistol pointed toward the ground, and their heads proudly erect as befitted men insensible to fear.

"Are you ready?" asked Chantal.

A clear ringing "Yes," uttered in the same breath by each of the opponents, answered him.

He allowed a few seconds to pass, then exclaimed:

"Fire at will."

The weapons were raised at the same instant; but Dartige did not



move, while Listrac, with his pistol leveled at his opponent, advanced rapidly to the line.

He had an undoubted right to do so; and Chantal turned pale, for, at such a short distance, the first shot would almost necessarily prove fatal.

A shot was fired, but only one. It was fired by Dartige, and it was very evident that his antagonist was wounded, for his pistol arm suddenly dropped at his side.

Dartige resumed his former attitude, and waited.

M. de Listrac tottered, and fell upon his knees.

Moulieres sprung forward to raise him; but the wounded man cried, hoarsely:

"Back to your place! I wish to fire. It is my turn."

No one could contest the right he claimed, to return shot for shot; but Chantal ventured to hope that he would not have strength to avail himself of it.

A frightful grimace contorted his livid face; but he nevertheless had strength to raise his arm and to aim at Dartige, who had not moved a muscle; but his hand trembled, and he delayed so long, that Chantal, finding the suspense intolerable, cried:

"Fire, for God's sake, fire, if you are going to!"

He pulled the trigger; but even as he did so, he sunk unconscious upon the turf, exhausted by this final effort.

The bullet missed Dartige, but a cry of pain resounded from the underbrush, a few feet behind him, a cry which he heard distinctly, though it escaped the ears of Chantal, who was standing a little further off.

Moulieres hastened to the assistance of the count, who gave no further signs of life; and Chantal, in accordance with the agreement made before the duel began, hastily turned to rejoin his friend. But even as he did so, to his very great surprise, he saw Dartige throw away his pistol and rush into the woods. He followed him and found him supporting Andrea, who had been wounded in the left arm by Listrac's bullet.

"It is nothing!" she murmured. "I would gladly have given my life to save you, and I deem myself fortunate to have been wounded by the hand of my godmother's murderer."

Dartige, speechless with emotion, clasped her in his arms, and tried to stanch, with his handkerchief, the slowly dripping blood, for the bullet had passed through the flesh without shattering any bone or cutting an artery.

"There is no fracture, nor is there any hemorrhage to be feared," said Chantal, examining the wound. "Mademoiselle is right. It is a mere scratch. She can return to Paris with us with perfect safety."

Chantal did not need to be told that this was his friend's affianced, for he had witnessed the parting at the railway station, though he had made no allusion to it.

"Are you suffering?" he inquired.

"Not any to speak of," replied Andrea cheerfully. "I felt, for an instant, as if some one had struck me a sharp blow, and the shock stunned me; but I feel now only a dull throbbing, and I can walk without the slightest difficulty."



Then, looking searchingly at Chantal, she asked:

"He is dead, is he not?"

"I think so; but I am going to make sure. I have nothing to do with him, still I must have a talk with his second, for the authorities must be informed of the affair. Dartige will accompany you to the carriage that is waiting for us at the other end of the lake. I will soon join you there; and we can then decide what course is best for us to pursue."

Dartige gladly obeyed this suggestion, for he was anxious to get Andrea away as soon as possible, in order to prevent her from becoming mixed up in this most unfortunate affair.

Chantal hastened back to the scene of the conflict, expecting to find Moulieres there. Indeed, he was surprised that Moulieres had not come in search of him before this time.

"He can have very little curiosity," he said to himself, "for we took to our heels as if we were going to run away; and yet he must have heard the sound of our voices. Why didn't he come to see what we were doing? Perhaps he did not want to leave Listrac. He may have wished to remain with him to the last. That surprises me a little, however, for I never thought he had a very deep affection for him."

Consequently, when Chantal reached the clearing, he was not a little amazed to find that Moulieres had disappeared.

"What if he has gone to call the gendarmes?" he muttered. "No, he must certainly wish to avoid them if possible. He must have made good his escape. But this much is certain: Listrac is dead, for he is still lying where he fell."

Chantal approached the body and found Listrac lying upon his back, with his arms extended, his face frightfully distorted, and his hands clinched.

The bullet had hit him in the right side, a little above the waist, and had undoubtedly severed some large artery. Chantal, merely for humanity's sake, wished to see if the count was beyond human aid, so he placed his hand upon the prostrate man's heart, but found that it had ceased to beat.

"If Moulieres has gone for a doctor he will have his labor for his pains" he said to himself. "Monsieur de Listrac has no further need of one, and there is nothing to keep me here. I ought to report to the authorities of Ville d'Array, perhaps, but they would probably detain me all day, and I would much rather return to Paris with Dartige and his betrothed. When we arrive there I will go to a magistrate of my acquaintance, and tell him the whole story. He will indicate the course we must pursue to avoid the unpleasant consequences I apprehend. I shall perhaps be blamed for abandoning the body, but it was Moulieres' duty to remain with it, and he has rushed off so hastily that he has even forgotten to pick up the pistols. What is the use of doing that, however? They will substantiate my testimony, and it is perhaps best to leave them here after all."

"And Dartige, too, has forgotten his overcoat. It is cold this morning, and he will need it. I had better take it to him."

As he stooped to pick up the garment his friend had thrown upon



the grass Chantal saw the wallet and pocket-book which were lying close by it.

"Oh, ho!" he muttered, "here are spoils which might tempt the first native that happened to pass this way. This wallet has every appearance of being filled to overflowing with bank-notes. I wish Moulières had taken charge of it, I am sure I don't care to. It won't do to leave it here, though. Some one will be sure to steal it, and in that case I should be, to a certain extent, responsible for the theft. I had better take it and place it in the hands of the magistrate to whom I intend to state all the particulars of the duel."

Having come to this conclusion Chantal pocketed the purse and wallet, threw Dartige's overcoat over his arm, and hastened off to rejoin his friend.

He overtook Dartige and his betrothed just as they were beckoning one of the coachmen to come and meet them with his carriage.

"Well, how do you feel, mademoiselle?" he asked.

"Quite comfortable, though terribly tired," replied Andrea. "I hardly know whether I can stand the ride in the cars or not."

"Besides, it is not necessary for people to see your arm tied up in a bloodstained handkerchief. I am of the opinion that it would be much better to drive back to Paris in this shabby calèche. I will try to induce the coachman to take us."

Dartige, who had not yet regained his wonted composure, was only too glad to leave all the arrangements to his friend, and the bargain was soon concluded. The coachman, liberally paid, cheerfully agreed to drive the party to the Rue Bourgogne, and even volunteered some information about Moulières, who had driven off to the station with all possible speed in the same carriage that had brought him.

"Yes, and he did not even stop to pick up the purse and wallet his friend had thrown upon the ground," remarked Chantal. "I took charge of them to prevent them from being stolen, and also of your overcoat which you will need, as the air is quite keen," he added, laying the garment upon Albert's lap, for they were now driving briskly along the road to Paris.

"What are you going to do with the purse and wallet?" inquired Dartige.

"Turn them over to a magistrate with whom I am well acquainted—a gentleman named Darcy. You very probably know him, too, at least by reputation. I judge that this wallet contains a good round sum, for living as he has been living for the past few days Listrac must have carried all he possessed about with him. I think I had better see."

"What! you think of opening the wallet?" exclaimed Dartige, in evident disapproval.

"Only to take an inventory of its contents," replied Chantal, drawing it from his pocket. "Why not? I shall not tamper with the contents. I only want to know what there is in it."

The carriage was rolling along the rugged road near Sevres, and the coachman, whose attention was engrossed by his horse, did not turn to see what his passengers were doing.

Dartige averted his eyes. He did not care to look at an article that had belonged to the man he had just killed.



Andrea, on the contrary, lifted her veil, and watched Chantal's movements with singular attention.

"I was not mistaken," that gentleman remarked, on opening the wallet. "Here is a large roll of thousand franc-notes, probably what remains of the sum he extorted from his wife before his departure for London. And here is a note from Moulieres, four lines, dated this morning. Moulieres reminds the count that he is to be at his, Moulieres', rooms at nine o'clock, and informs him that the duel is to be fought between eleven and twelve o'clock, near the lake at Ville d'Avray. This will serve to prove that a duel had been agreed upon, and that Monsieur de Listrac was not drawn into a trap."

"I do not understand why you tamper with a dead man's papers," said Dartige. "Shut up the wallet, I beg."

"I haven't the slightest objection to doing so. I have seen enough."

"Will you show me the note you just mentioned?" asked Andrea, eagerly.

This request greatly astonished both the gentlemen.

"I have not the slightest objection," replied Chantal, "but why are you so anxious to see it? I have just told you the contents."

With her right hand, the only one she could use, Andrea drew from her bosom a medallion which she wore suspended from a chain about her throat, and handing it to Dartige, said:

"It is my father's portrait. Press the spring you see projecting from the setting."

Dartige obeyed, and saw that there was a small bit of paper that had grown yellow with time behind the portrait.

"Untold the paper," Andrea continued, "and compare the handwriting with that of Monsieur de Moulieres' note."

"They are identical in every respect," her lover replied, after complying with the request.

"I was sure of it. My instinct rarely deceives me," said the young Italian.

"But will you have the goodness to explain? What conclusion do you draw from this resemblance, which, by the way, is incontestable?"

"I conclude from it that it was Moulieres who murdered my father."

"Your father!—I do not understand."

"My father was assassinated fifteen years ago in Florence by some person who had written requesting him to meet him at midnight on the Quai de l'Arno. That letter is in your hands, and God at last permits it to serve as the means of discovering the murderer that the authorities of my native land were unable to find."

"This is a proof, in fact, but I doubt if it would be considered sufficiently conclusive. It will be necessary, in the first place, to establish the authenticity of this letter, which should have been made public before," remarked Chantal.

"I was only an infant when my father died," Andrea explained. "It was my grandmother who preserved this letter and intrusted it to my keeping the day I left Florence."

"Will you, in turn, intrust it to me for a few hours? I should



like to show it to a magistrate I intend to call upon as soon as I reach Paris."

"I will call on him with you," replied the girl, evidently unwilling to part with the letter.

"That would be out of the question, mademoiselle. You forget that you are wounded, and in any case it would be much better for you to wait until the magistrate sends for you."

"I think so, too," added Dartige.

"I will wait, then, but please give me back the portrait and letter."

"Here they are, mademoiselle," replied Chantal. "Guard them with the utmost care, and trust to me for the rest."

The rest of the journey was made in unbroken silence.

One does not feel inclined to talk when one has just killed a man, even though the man be a wretch utterly unworthy of pity, and Chantal was considering the possible consequences of this duel, which, though it had been conducted with perfect fairness, had nevertheless been irregular in some respects; such, for instance, as the absence of a physician, and the flight of Moulières, and Chantal apprehended a judicial investigation, or at least a frightful scandal.

The carriage had passed the *barrière* when Chantal remarked:

"I told this coachman to drive to the Rue Bourgogne, but, of course, mademoiselle will not wish to alight there. You had better take her home first."

"That is what I intended to do. Will you not accompany us?"

"No, I must see Darcy without a moment's loss of time. He will be at his office at this hour of the day, and as I see a carriage stand over there I am going to hire one to take me straight to the Palace of Justice."

And without waiting for his friend's reply, Chantal called to the coachman to stop, and sprung out, leaving Dartige alone with his betrothed.

The magistrate he intended to call upon was a man of the world, a magistrate of the old school, wealthy, independent, and intelligent. He was a bachelor, and had seen enough of society to understand certain phases of Parisian life. Though considerably older than Chantal they had been schoolmates, and were still on the best of terms, though they had not seen very much of each other since they left the university of Charlemagne—M. Darcy to follow the same profession his father had followed before him, and Chantal to spend his income in the most agreeable manner.

Chantal found the magistrate in his office as he had predicted. He even had the unexpected good fortune to find him alone.

"What good wind has blown you here?" inquired the magistrate, offering a hand to his visitor.

"I wish to consult you upon a very serious matter."

"You have chosen a very good time. I have no one to examine to-day. What is the matter?"

"I have just acted as second for one of my friends who has killed his opponent."

"That is not such a terrible thing nowadays. Years ago you would both have been sent before the Court of Assizes, but our jurisprudence has been considerably modified of late, and it not



unfrequently happens that there is no investigation in such cases; that is, of course, if we have no reason to suspect any foul play. And there was none, of course, in the present instance. Where did the duel take place?"

"At Ville d'Avray."

"Ville d'Avray is in Seine-et-Oise, and if you have trouble it will be with the authorities of Versailles. That being the case I can do little or nothing for you, as I am not acquainted with the government attorney of that department. But you will get safely out of the scrape, never fear, for your friend, of course, is an honorable man like yourself."

"Strictly honorable. My friend is Albert Dartige, whom you must have met. He was once secretary of legation at Vienna, and subsequently at St. Petersburg."

"I remember him well. Why did he fight?"

"Because he struck his adversary in the face."

"Then he was the aggressor. That is a pity!"

"He can not be blamed, however, for Listrac insulted him first."

"Listrac! Do you mean the Count de Listrac, the husband of Clara Monti, who committed suicide at the Théâtre-Lyrique last evening?"

"The same. I see that you are familiar with the unfortunate woman's story."

"All Paris knows it. I know, too, why she poisoned herself. Her husband extorted a large sum of money from her on false pretenses, and then had the audacity to show himself, last evening, at the opera, in a box with her rival. No one will bemoan his fate. He got only his deserts; that is, unless Monsieur Dartige was Madame de Listrac's lover."

"On the contrary, he was about to marry a *protégée* of hers, a young Italian lady. And, by the way, I must finish my confession. This young lady was so foolish as to follow us, without our having the slightest suspicion of the fact. It seems she suspected that her betrothed was going to fight a duel, and so concealed herself in the woods to witness it."

"Indeed! She must be something of a heroine!"

"She was punished for her folly, however. The count, though mortally wounded, managed to fire at his adversary; and the bullet intended for Dartige wounded the young lady in the arm. It was a mere scratch, however, and she returned to Paris with us."

"Why, this is quite a romance!"

"On the contrary, it is a true story, as the wounded girl is ready to testify, and to prove by showing you her injured arm. Still, I fear this strange incident only complicates the affair—nor is this all—"

"What else have you to tell?" asked the judge, frowning slightly.

"Only that we lost our senses—Dartige especially. We were so much alarmed about the young lady whom we supposed much more seriously injured than she really was, that instead of notifying any of the local authorities of the facts, we hastened off to Paris, leaving the body."

"You did very wrong," said M. Darcy, gravely. "But Monsieur de Listrac's second did not abandon him, of course?"



"His second left before we did, though he had not the same excuse for his hasty departure."

"That is singular. I may as well tell you that you and your friend will doubtless be called to an account for your conduct. Monsieur de Listrac's second will also be summoned."

"There will be no difficulty about finding him. He is very well known at the clubs. His name is Moulieres, and he has been quite intimate with Listrac for some time."

"Moulieres!" repeated the magistrate. "It seems to me I have heard the name before."

"That is not surprising. The gentleman is very extensively known."

"But I have a dim recollection of seeing it in some police report, or in some case I was investigating. But how did you happen to get mixed up in a duel with two such notorious characters?"

"Dartige is a particular friend of mine, and I could not refuse to assist him."

"This friendship will perhaps cost you dear. Moulieres is quite capable of declaring that Monsieur de Listrac was murdered; and the fact that the body was abandoned will give some weight to the charge."

"I have thought of all that. You are of the opinion that I had better surrender myself to the authorities, are you not?"

"Not yet. Let me first state the case to some one who can tell us all about the antecedents of these gentlemen I refer to—the Count de Listrac and Moulieres, of course."

M. Darcy wrote a few lines, rang the bell, folded his note, and handed it to the messenger, who appeared in answer to the summons.

"You will say that the case is very urgent, and that I am waiting," he remarked.

The messenger bowed, and hastened from the room.

"Now, my dear Chantal," resumed the judge, "I can not say what my colleague at Versailles will do, but though you and your friend Dartige have gotten yourself in a bad scrape I trust that your excellent reputations will protect you; and I will try to furnish you with the means to establish the worthlessness of the people with whom you were associated. But, unfortunately, Clara Monti's suicide is the great topic of the day, and as people will very naturally suppose this duel to be in some way connected with that, undue importance will probably be attached to it, and consequently you may expect any amount of annoyance."

"I do expect it," replied Chantal, coldly, "and, in order to relieve myself of one responsibility I assumed, I will now surrender to you this article that I picked up near Monsieur de Listrac's body."

"A wallet!" exclaimed M. Darcy, in astonishment.

"And a purse. I hope you do not suspect me of having stolen them. The purse contains gold, and the wallet contains bank-notes, and some letters about which I would like to speak to you."

"I do not consider myself authorized to receive them," said the magistrate.

"And I will not keep them. You can send them to the Versailles authorities, if you think proper; only, I warn you that there is a



letter from Moulières in the wallet—a letter that is of no importance in itself, but which may serve to clear up a mystery of long standing—”

Just then the door opened, and a man, whose appearance struck Chantal very forcibly, entered the room. Eyes of wonderful clearness and penetration illumined the regular features of this gentleman, in whom Chantal instantly recognized a prominent member of the detective corps. M. Darcy greeted him with marked deference, and motioning him to a seat beside him, said politely:

“I am very sorry to be obliged to trespass upon your valuable time; but I am anxious to obtain some information of great importance to one of my particular friends, Monsieur Chantal here.”

The official bowed, with a quick glance at Chantal, then replied:

“I have the honor of knowing the gentleman.

“Oh, by name and reputation only,” he added, noting Chantal’s movement of surprise. “The surveillance of all gaming establishments was formerly one of my duties.”

“I have never played except at the clubs,” said Chantal.

“I am aware of that sir; but the clubs were also under my supervision. There is scarcely one of them in which some much to-be-regretted episode or altercation has not occurred. The club to which you belong is certainly one of the most respectable in the city; and yet I could name several members whose antecedents are anything but reputable.”

“The information I wish to obtain from you relates to two members of this club,” said M. Darcy.

“Yes, the Count de Listrac, and Monsieur de Moulières,” replied the new-comer. “At least, those were the names mentioned in the note with which you honored me.”

“Yes; and your records probably give you a pretty correct idea of the moral character of each.”

“Certainly. The record concerning Monsieur de Listrac covers only the past year, as he led an irreproachable life up to that time.”

“But since?”

“He has since become infatuated with a very dangerous widow, and it was undoubtedly on her account that he left the wife whose suicide is creating so much talk just at this time. It seems, too, that he extorted large amounts of money from her. He persuaded her to pay the debts he contracted in his stock speculations, besides extorting money from her by means unworthy of any honorable man. The crimes he has committed, however, are not those the law reaches. He has not stolen, nor has he cheated at cards, though he may come to that sooner or later.”

“No; for he is dead. He has just been killed in a duel.”

“So much the better for him,” said the official, philosophically. “He might have come to a much worse end. As for Moulières, he is an adventurer of the worst type, and we have had an eye on him for a long time; but he is very shrewd, and has thus far succeeded in keeping out of the clutches of the law.”

“What are his antecedents?”

“He was born in Marseilles, and his real name is Margolin. After getting into several scrapes in his native town, he went to Italy to seek his fortune. As he was well educated, and quite gentlemanly



in appearance, he succeeded in working his way into fashionable society there, though he was secretly connected with a company of gamblers who carry on their trade in the clubs of our large cities. He made a good deal of money in this way, and came to Paris about fifteen years ago, with quite a fortune.

"On his arrival here he changed his tactics completely, and entered into a secret partnership with a former broker, named Menager; and the two have since practiced usury with great success. Moulieres devotes his attention to looking up customers. As soon as any member of his club becomes embarrassed, by reason of losses at the gaming-table, Moulieres sends him to Menager, who divides the profits with the sender. The gentleman's friends do not suspect that he carries on this business. He is very popular in the circle in which he moves, and he has even won quite a reputation as a lady's man. He has long been the devoted friend of the fascinating widow I spoke of just now, and, as she is wealthy, I think he intends to marry her if possible."

"Is she not the widow of a worthy native of Normandy, who was killed in a duel?"

"Yes, sir; and she, too, figures in the records of our office. Before she became a widow she was implicated in a criminal case—the murder of a young woman who lived in the same house with her, and who was found one morning dead in her bed."

"I recollect; but Madame de Benserade was neither accused nor even suspected of the crime."

"She was not accused of it, for there were no proofs against her; but the chief of the detective service was satisfied that the crime was committed by the baroness. The culprit was never discovered, and the investigation was long since dropped."

"Then it would be useless to reopen it now; besides, this woman does not seem to be involved in the matter upon which I wish to consult you. Moulieres acted as Monsieur de Listrac's second in the duel, and Monsieur Chantal was his opponent's second, and there is some danger that the authorities may decide to prosecute, for the affair was not conducted in strict accordance with the usual custom. For instance, the victim was left where he fell."

"I am not surprised to hear that, for Moulieres was probably in a hurry to inform the baroness of Listrac's death."

"Then you think he went there?"

"I am almost positive that we should find him there at this very moment; and, if you think Monsieur Chantal and his friend have any real danger to apprehend from Moulieres and the baroness, I can easily avert it by intimidating this sharper and this unscrupulous baroness. I shall only have to allude to their past, to accomplish it."

"Will you permit me to ask if, in the record of Moulieres' life, you have seen any mention of a sojourn in Florence?" Chantal inquired, hastily.

"He spent the winter of '69-70 in that city, but left it very suddenly to take up his abode in Paris, though no one could explain why he decided to abruptly quit a place where he had been extraordinarily successful."



"I know. He had murdered an Italian artist, and was anxious to make his escape without loss of time."

"I think I know the case to which you refer. The artist's name was Vitellio, and he had accused Moulieres of cheating at cards. But the Italian authorities did not suspect the latter of the crime."

"They did not see what I have seen; a letter that proves him the culprit beyond any possibility of doubt."

"A letter?"

"Yes; one that was sent to the unfortunate Vitellio, to lure him, at night, to the lonely spot where he met his death. The letter bears no signature, but the handwriting is exactly like that of a note written by Moulieres to his friend Listrac this morning—a note which was in the wallet that I picked up at the scene of the duel, and that I have just laid upon Monsieur Darcy's desk."

"Have you the other letter, the one addressed to Vitellio?"

"No; but I know where it is, and I can show it to you whenever you please."

"Still I can not threaten Moulieres with arrest for a crime committed fifteen years ago," replied the detective.

"Perhaps not," rejoined Chantal, "but you can certainly compel him to admit that the duel was fairly conducted in every respect, and that it was Listrac himself who imposed the conditions. And after he has given this testimony, you can surely compel him to leave France, in company with Madame de Benserade—if he chooses."

"I see no objection to that," remarked M. Darcy.

"Then I will set to work," responded the detective. "I will only ask Monsieur Chantal if he has any objections to telling me who is in possession of the letter addressed to Vitellio?"

"It is in the hands of his daughter, Andrea Vitellio, who will soon be the wife of my friend Dartige, and who now resides at No. 41 Quai Voltaire. If you wish to see her—"

"Your word is sufficient, sir. I am going straight to the house of Madame de Benserade, as his honor, the judge of instruction, seems to have no further need of me."

"Not at present," replied M. Darcy; "but you know I can not do without you long."

"My dear friend," the judge remarked to Chantal, when they were once more alone together, "I am now compromised to some extent, at least, in this unfortunate affair, and I shall do my best to get you out of the scrape. You, your friend Dartige, and the young Italian lady, may all expect to be examined, and I hope that you will tell the whole truth. I also hope that Monsieur de Moulieres will not dare to perjure himself. But I utterly fail to understand your intentions in regard to him and the Baroness de Benserade."

"I want the scoundrel to marry the infamous creature, so they can go and end their days together in a foreign land, as people of their stamp are likely to end their days."

"That will be Clara Monti's revenge."



## CHAPTER X.

ON the morning of the duel, Juliette de Benserade rose at the usual hour, ordered her coachman to be ready to drive her to the Bois at three o'clock, and sat down to breakfast about noon, with an excellent appetite.

Although she felt almost certain that Listrac and Dartige intended to fight that morning, the fact did not impair her appetite in the least, though we must do her the justice to say that she had not the slightest idea that her lover would be killed, for she knew that he was an excellent shot, and the scandal that the duel would be sure to create rather pleased her than otherwise.

She very rarely read the papers, but being anxious to know what was said about the performance at the Théâtre-Lyrique the evening before, she picked up the "Figaro," and the first thing upon which her eyes fell was a brief account of Clara Monti's suicide.

Her surprise and emotion were so intense that she overturned the cup of tea she had in her hand.

"Dead!" she murmured. "Then George is free!"

That was her first thought. Not one pang of compassion, not a single regret for the poor woman she had driven to this desperate deed. She rose, saying to herself as she did so:

"Had I known this, I would have prevented the duel."

All the advantages she might reap from George de Listrac's widowhood had been duly considered long ago. He had nothing to give her now, but his name, perhaps; but that was something. She knew him thoroughly, and felt sure that to regain the means of leading his former luxurious life, he would be willing to marry almost any woman, no matter how unattractive she might be; but she knew that he loved her with a love that had caused his own undoing, and that he would not hesitate to brave certain prejudices for her sake. She foresaw that he might attempt to impoverish her, as he had impoverished Clara Monti, but she felt confident of her ability to protect her rights. It was all very well for a love-sick Italian to allow her wealth to be wrested from her, fragment by fragment, but Juliette de Benserade justly considered herself incapable of any such weakness. And even if she should be compelled to resort to a separation to maintain her rights, she would still remain the Countess de Listrac, and so would have no cause to regret the armorial design now emblazoned upon her carriages.

The news agitated her so deeply, that, instead of finishing her breakfast, she went out into the garden, newspaper in hand, to walk off her uneasiness.

"I certainly am in luck!" she said to herself. "George will not be killed. What if I should go to his rooms and wait for him? But no; if there should be any duel, Moulières would certainly act as George's second, and whatever the result may be, Moulières will certainly lose no time in reporting to me; so the best thing I can do is to wait as patiently as I can."



And she did wait, consoling herself for this enforced delay by roseate dreams of the future.

Moulieres came at last, and found her sitting near the door of the conservatory, in the very spot where she had spoken to Clara Monti for the first and last time about a month before.

"Well?" she asked, springing up eagerly.

Moulieres saw by her expression that she had mistrusted all, so, neglecting all his carefully-prepared preliminaries, he replied simply:

"Well, he is dead."

"Killed by Dartige?"

"Yes. He fell upon his knees; but he had strength enough left to fire. The bullet missed its mark, however, and he died without uttering a word."

"And you left him there?"

"Yes; and I did very wrong, for his opponent and the seconds will probably be prosecuted. I shall be blamed for leaving him, unquestionably; but he was beyond all human aid, and it was necessary to inform you without delay. I was anxious that you should be in a position to decide upon your future course as soon as possible."

"My decision is already made, for I thought it quite likely this might happen, and even if George had lived, I was resolved to break the ties that bound me to him, and regain my liberty," replied the baroness, unblushingly.

"But what use do you intend to make of this liberty?"

"Enjoy it. I am rich, and I can live to suit my own fancy, without asking any favors of any one. I shall sell this house where I am bored to death, and purchase another near the Bois de Boulogne, where I can entertain my friends."

"Your friends? Do you suppose that you have any friends left?"

"Plenty of them."

"You are very much mistaken, my dear. After what has occurred, no one will visit you."

"Why? Merely because the Count de Listrac has been killed in a duel, and because he quarreled with his wife who afterward committed suicide?"

"Ah! so you know that?"

"I saw it in the newspaper this morning."

"And you have no idea that both these tragical deaths will be attributed to your influence! Then you must know very little about Parisian society. It is very lenient, it is true, but its tolerance has its limits. As soon as a woman causes a startling scandal, every one unites in pointing the finger of scorn at her, and all Paris saw you last evening gazing down in triumph at the diva, who poisoned herself from sheer despair."

"All Paris saw you as well as me. You were with me, recollect."

"Oh, I do not flatter myself that I shall escape public censure. I compromised myself to please you, and I shall have to share the disgrace with you. I know very well that I shall have to leave the club. If I do not resign my membership voluntarily, my name



will be erased from the list of members, and I shall have anything but a pleasant time of it if I attempt to remain in Paris."

"Then you think of leaving the city?"

"Most assuredly I do. I, too, am rich, much richer than you are, my dear Juliette; but here my wealth would not save me from slights and rebuffs. I shall spend it in some foreign land; and I would advise you to do the same. There are cases in which exile becomes a positive necessity."

"I do not look at the matter as you do. Besides, it is very easy for you to talk, but what would become of a lone, unprotected woman in a foreign land?"

"You need not be alone. I should be very glad to accompany you as your husband."

"I should not gain much, and might, perhaps, lose a good deal, by such an arrangement."

"What could you possibly lose?"

"Why, all I possess. The husband is Chancellor of the Exchequer; all the money is at his disposal."

"Not when the wife's property is settled upon herself."

"Clara Monti's was."

"You are not Clara Monti, any more than I am George de Listrac. Clara Monti was madly in love with her husband, and I have no expectation of turning your head. You have always been a good friend to me, but I have never inspired you with what is called a passion. Besides, Listrac gambled desperately, both at the card-table, and in stocks. I never gamble; my fortune is intact, and I am not obliged to live upon my wife's money."

"Then why do you wish to marry me?"

"Because in union there is strength. Apart, we should be only wanderers and exiles; married, we should be Monsieur and Madame de Moulieres, wealthy capitalists, who would have the *entrée* of the best society in Austria or Russia. We would commence by feeling our way, that is to say, we would travel until we found some country in which our reception would be sufficiently cordial to induce us to take up our permanent abode there. Having decided on our place of residence, we would then purchase a large estate or château near the capital, and live there in royal style."

"Thanks, but I hate the country," said Mme. de Benserade, curtly.

"I found it intolerable during my first husband's life, and I have no desire to try it again."

"Very well, I understand. You refuse me."

"I prefer to remain as I am."

"You have a perfect right to do so, of course," replied Moulieres, dryly. "I shall not try to marry you against your will, and as you think yourself able to dispense with my protection, I shall allow you to protect yourself, and shall content myself with telling you that we are about to be subjected to an ordeal for which, I am sure, you are wholly unprepared. I am expecting to be called before the authorities of Versailles at any moment. They will examine me in regard to the cause of this duel which resulted so fatally to one of the parties engaged in it, and I shall tell them the truth. You, too, may expect to be called upon to give an account of your connection



with Listrac, and in that case, your position will be anything but enviable."

"While if I were Madame de Moulieres, I should be the wife of an adventurer. My position would be no better, it seems to me," was the sneering reply.

"So you insult me!" he exclaimed, pale with anger.

"You insulted me first," replied the baroness, now thoroughly exasperated.

Moulieres was about to depart with rage in his heart, when a footman appeared in the garden, closely followed by a gentleman who seemed to have forced his way in sorely against the servant's will.

The baroness, more and more incensed, stepped forward with the very evident intention of taking the servant to task, and curtly dismissing the intruder, but the stranger met her half way, and said, bowing gravely:

"Madame, I have called at the request of Monsieur Darcy, Judge of Instruction."

The baroness changed countenance, and hastily motioned the valet to leave them.

Moulieres, who had heard the remark, picked up his hat as if preparing to make his escape; but the stranger said to him:

"Remain, sir. I have business with you, as well as with madame."

"That is hardly probable. I do not know you."

"But I know you perfectly well. You are Monsieur de Moulieres, and you were the intimate friend of the Monsieur de Listrac, who has just been killed in a duel. Indeed, you acted as his second."

"I do not deny it. Now who are you?" asked Moulieres who had already regained his wonted assurance.

"It matters little who I am," replied the stranger, "as I just told you that Monsieur Darcy, a judge of instruction, sent me here. That piece of information should be sufficient, it seems to me."

"Very well," retorted Moulieres. "You have come to question me in regard to the particulars of the duel, I suppose?"

"I have no authority to question you. I merely called in obedience to orders, to talk with you and this lady about Monsieur de Listrac's death, and also about another matter. The conversation will not be a lengthy one, and we can conclude it without leaving the garden." The stranger had emphasized the words in obedience to orders, and the two culprits realized that they were in the presence of some officer of the law.

"As you please, sir," replied the baroness, trying to make the best of it.

The stranger was now standing between M. de Moulieres and the baroness, who were both in a very uncomfortable frame of mind.

"Sir," he began, turning to Moulieres, "you will be summoned before the Chief of Police at Versailles to-morrow."

"I shall present myself before him without waiting for a formal summons," was the response.

"That is what you had better do, for when you leave here, you will be followed by two detectives who have been detailed to watch over you."



"What! am I taken for a common malefactor?" asked Moulieres, insolently. "The duel was conducted fairly, and I lead an honorable life."

"Is it considered honorable in Paris to be the partner of a usurer, and to share the profits of his business with him?"

"Sir!"

"Oh, you need not feign indignation. I can give you his name and residence: Menager, Rue Godot de Mauroy."

"I know this person. He has loaned me money, but I defy you to prove that I have an interest in his business."

"It will not be a difficult thing to prove, however, if Menager is examined. Still, that is not the question just now. But as for believing that you have borrowed from him! Nonsense! you have made enough in Italy and elsewhere, not to need any more."

"I do not understand you."

"You will very soon. You certainly have not forgotten a certain Monsieur Margolin, of Marseilles, who won so much money in Florence about fifteen years ago."

Moulieres turned as pale as death.

"I see that you recollect him," continued M. Darcy's deputy, "and we know perfectly well what became of this Margolin who, only a few days after a certain tragical event, suddenly disappeared from the city where he had been successfully operating so long. An Italian artist had been mysteriously murdered in the street. The perpetrator of the crime was not discovered, however. He took refuge in Paris, and is still here."

"What possible object can you have in telling me this story?" stammered Moulieres.

"I tell it so that if you should happen to know Margolin's present whereabouts, you can warn him that a letter has recently been discovered which implicates him deeply—the letter the unknown assassin wrote to Vitellio, asking him to meet him at midnight, in a lonely spot—and we now have conclusive proof that this letter is in Margolin's handwriting."

Moulieres was livid; and Mme. de Benserade, who was watching him closely, seemed to enjoy his evident discomfiture intensely.

"You might add," continued the visitor, "that he will make a great mistake in considering himself safe because the crime is outlawed. It is true that he could not be prosecuted for a crime committed in 1869, but as he has recently been mixed up in a most unfortunate affair, there is sure to be a careful inquiry into his antecedents, and he will be treated accordingly. If I were in his place, I would leave the country without delay."

"And so would I," said the baroness, in a cruelly ironical tone.

"I am happy to learn that you agree with me, madame," resumed the stranger. "When one has not a clear conscience, one should keep out of the way of the authorities of one's country. Our officials make mistakes sometimes, and get upon the wrong scent; but it sometimes happens, too, that after months and years, they hit upon the right clew and reopen an abandoned investigation. For example, three or four years ago—perhaps longer, a young woman residing on the Rue de l'Arcade was stabbed in her bed."

Juliette gave a sudden start.



"Pardon me, madame, did I jostle you? This walk is so very narrow."

"No, no, it is nothing," replied the baroness.

"Then I will go on with my story. Quite a number of persons were arrested, the maid-servant—the maid-servant's lover, a scoundrel of the lowest kind—their innocence was incontestable. The lover of the victim was also arrested. He was a gentleman of fair reputation, and widely known in Paris. He proved that he was not the perpetrator of the crime, and not long afterward, he was killed in a duel precisely as Monsieur de Listrac has just been killed. The investigation was finally dropped, but I have always been satisfied, in my own mind, that the detectives looked in the wrong direction, and that it was a woman who dealt the fatal blow—a woman of wealth and position. No one even suspected her of the crime, but it takes such a trifle to arouse sleeping justice. If this woman still lives—she is at the mercy of the merest chance. If she should do anything that would attract attention to her, or if she should get herself talked about, her past would of course, be thoroughly sifted, and for that reason, if she is a prudent woman, she will get across the frontier as quickly as possible."

"But that would be equivalent to a confession of guilt," stammered the baroness.

"Bah! when it is a question of saving one's life, or escaping imprisonment for life, one should not be too particular. When this woman is once out of France, no one will demand her extradition. The offense was committed so long ago that it is well-nigh forgotten."

"But to return to the duel. Monsieur de Moulieres, who served as one of the seconds, will certainly be examined, and so very probably will you, madame. You knew Monsieur de Listrac intimately, and are doubtless in a position to furnish valuable information regarding the origin of the quarrel that cost that gentleman his life. Still, as you took no part in the affair, as soon as you have told all you know, I think no one will oppose your departure, should a desire to travel seize you. Later, however, it will perhaps be very different. Take my advice, and profit by the fine weather that is just beginning. Do not go to Italy—it is too warm there, already—and Monsieur de Moulieres could not join you there—but Switzerland is charming in the spring."

The three had walked slowly along one of the paths as they talked, and they were now near the gate which separated the garden from the Rue de Monceau.

"There is nothing left for me now, madame, but to take leave of you—and of this gentleman," the stranger said, in conclusion, pausing suddenly.

"If this is all you had to say to us, your visit was a waste of time," growled Moulieres.

"No; for I feel positive that you will profit by it—and whether you follow it or not, I have certainly given you some good advice, as you will admit, sooner or later.

"So, madame and monsieur, I have the honor to bid you good-day."



And with this polite commonplace, the man turned upon his heel, and departed as quietly as he had come.

"He is certainly mad," murmured Mme. de Benserade, to reassure herself.

"By no means," replied Moulieres. "On the contrary, I think him very sensible, for he regards our situation in exactly the same light that I do. Paris is no longer tenable for either of us."

"What?"

"For you, more especially, my dear friend," he continued. "The little episode our agreeable visitor just related to us, occurred on the Rue de l'Arcade, near the Madeleine, and only a few squares from the Palais de Justice. Many persons recollect it—I among others."

"As persons in Florence remember the Marseillais, Margolin, probably."

"Margolin no longer exists."

"He has changed his name, but not his skin."

"No more than you have. And you would have made a great mistake in so doing, for you have a lovely complexion. As for the name, will you not consent to bear mine, now?"

"Which? The real or the fictitious one?"

"Neither. I have money enough to purchase a foreign title. You shall be neither Madame Margolin nor Madame de Moulieres; you shall be the Countess or the Marquise of —, no matter what. Our marriage will be none the less valid on that account."

"Not in London or St. Petersburg, perhaps."

"Nor in France, for that matter. As soon as we have selected our place of residence, we will be married there in the presence of the French Consul, and after we are legally united, the past will be forgotten."

"If I could be sure of that!"

"Try it. I have no desire to force myself upon you. Leave France alone. Go wherever you please, and I will join you as soon as the threatened investigation is satisfactorily concluded—as it will be—for we shall have no difficulty in proving that the duel at Ville d'Avray was fairly conducted.

"If you select Vienna, I will go to Vienna; and if you decide, as I hope you will, that we were intended for each other, you will marry me. But I wish you to do it of your own free will; and I shall allow you plenty of time for reflection before binding yourself."

"I do not refuse upon these conditions. But how can I leave immediately?"

"What is there to prevent? The only real estate you own, I believe, is this house, and your lawyer can soon dispose of this for you, while you can easily convert your ready money into a bill of exchange upon a Vienna banker. That is what I shall do with mine when the time comes for me to bid a final farewell to my native land."

"You are in no haste to leave it, it seems to me."

"On the contrary, I am in great haste to leave it; but I can not do so until the investigation is ended. You heard what that man said?"



"Yes; and I wonder who he can be?"

"A prominent and remarkably well-informed member of the detective corps, evidently. He came to give us a warning we should do very wrong to neglect; nor did he give this warning without being duly authorized to do it. This means that the authorities are not anxious to bring up these old matters, but that they will not tolerate our presence here."

"In short, perpetual exile is before us; a not very cheerful prospect, by the way. I shall resign myself to it, of course, if need be; but I don't understand why I should be obliged to leave any sooner than you do."

"Merely because ten years have not elapsed since you resided on the Rue de l'Arcade," replied Moulieres, with a searching glance at the baroness.

Juliette started violently. She was beginning to realize that every crime must be expiated sooner or later, and that her past prevented her from having any other ally than this sharper and assassin.

"Take my advice," he continued, "and do not wait until after Clara Monti's funeral. All Paris will be there; and among those who follow her to the grave there will be not a few who would be glad to set fire to your house after the obsequies. You will not be safe until you are on the other side of the frontier."

"Very well," replied the baroness, sullenly. "I will leave Paris to-morrow."

"Where will you go?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"Will you wait for me at Zurich—at the Hotel Baur—on the lake?"

"Perhaps so."

"I hope to be there in a week. I will accompany you to the railway station to-morrow. I must go to Versailles now. The visit must be deferred no longer."

"Are you sure that you will be allowed to return?"

"If I am detained by the authorities, I will inform you of the fact. But I shall not be forcibly detained, for in that case it would be necessary to arrest Monsieur Dartige and Monsieur Chantal as well, and they are too well and favorably known for any severe measures to be taken against them. This evening I will report to you and I venture to hope that in six months you will be my wife."

Mme. de Benserade hung her head, but made no reply. She felt that she would be obliged to consent sooner or later, and she dimly foresaw the future that awaited her as the wife of a scoundrel who would treat her as Listrac had treated Clara Monti; but overtaken by this strange fatality she no longer had courage to struggle against her destiny. For the first time in her life it occurred to her that Jehovah's justice sometimes overtakes culprits in this world before punishing them in the other. She did not pity her victims; she felt no repentance for what she had done, but she was afraid.

And she had cause to tremble, for marriage is the most terrible of chastisements for some women.



## EPILOGUE.

ON a beautiful June day, fifteen months after Clara Monti's death, a young and beautiful woman, escorted by two gentlemen, and preceded by three guides, was ascending the rugged road leading from the inn at Montauvert to the Mer de Glace.

They had left the Royal Hotel at Chamouni that morning, to make this excursion, which is considered obligatory upon all tourists who visit Switzerland, and they were now nearing the goal. They could already catch occasional glimpses of the celebrated glacier on the left, and above them, through the pines, the hotel recently built upon the edge of the frozen torrent, opposite the imposing Aiguille du Dru, was plainly visible.

One of the gentlemen rode by the lady's side, and the tender glances they interchanged seemed to indicate that they were a newly married couple. The other gentleman followed them closely, and kept up a running fire of lively sallies.

"I must say that so far as ice is concerned, I would greatly prefer one of Tortoni's to all this here," he remarked, laughing. "That is much nearer the boulevard, and one can enjoy it in a comfortable seat, while these accursed saddles are so many instruments of torture. Besides, there are too many of her Britannic Majesty's subjects in William Tell's valley. I am sure we shall find two or three dozen of them up there."

"I do not look at them," replied the lady in the same laughing tone. "I can see only Albert; and so they will not prevent me from enjoying this sublime scenery."

"Can it be that you have no poetry in your soul, my poor Chantal?" added the husband. "Last evening, for fear of taking cold, you would not leave the inn to contemplate the summit of Mont Blanc, gilded by the last rays of the setting sun, and to-day the most beautiful view in all Switzerland fails to arouse the slightest enthusiasm in your breast."

"I shall admire it more after I have breakfasted, perhaps; but I am positive that it will not compare in beauty with the view of Florence from the heights of Fiesole. And I am sure that your wife is of the same opinion."

"That is true; but I am not an impartial judge. I like Florence best because I was born there, and above all, because I was married there."

"Then Dartige must be of the same opinion."

"I always think as Andrea does."

"Ah, you are fortunate mortals! And to think how I used to sneer at wedded bliss. Since I have been traveling with you, I begin to long to get married myself. I hardly know myself."

"We had to pay dearly for our happiness," sighed Andrea; "and it would be much more complete if godmother were with us."

"The fact is, she made a great mistake in killing herself on the evening of the first performance of 'Romeo and Juliet.' Had she



waited until the second evening, she would have been a widow; and then she would have been better reconciled to life, perhaps."

"What pleasure can you find in reviving these sorrowful memories?" interposed Dartige.

"Pardon me, my dear friend, it was not I who first alluded to the subject. Besides, all's well that ends well. Your most ecstatic dreams of happiness are fully realized; and the wretches who killed the poor countess have all been punished."

"Not all. Her husband is dead, it is true; but how about the others?"

"Moulières and Madame de Benserade? Their fate has been even worse. They have become partners in vice; and it is not difficult to foresee what will become of them."

"I did hear that they had married in some foreign land, but—"

"What! is it possible that you can not see how the marriage will end? Moulières will want to get rid of his wife some day or other. After he has obtained possession of all her property, he will kill her; and this time he will not escape the gallows."

"Here is the hotel!" exclaimed the lady, with an evident desire to cut short a conversation that reminded her of her father's murder and the suicide of her benefactress.

The party had reached the cliff overlooking the Mer de Glace, and the waiters were already rushing out to invite the travelers to alight and take breakfast before visiting the glacier.

Chantal, who had not much taste for arduous expeditions, insisted that they should breakfast first, and Dartige and his wife consented on condition that he would allow them time to admire the view before seating themselves at the table. As he consented to this arrangement, they left him in order to approach the edge of the moraine, while Chantal, who was sadly wanting in enthusiasm, walked straight into the hotel, where he began an examination of the register in which strangers not only inscribe their names, but very often extremely ludicrous comments upon the grandeur of the scene before them.

While he was engaged in this examination, a gentleman and lady, of whom he caught only a hasty glance, passed him on their way out of the hotel.

As Chantal turned from the register to give the order for breakfast, the lady re-entered the hotel alone, approached the register which Chantal had left open upon the desk, and hastily wrote a few words.

She had no sooner done this than she turned to go away, and Chantal thought he must be dreaming when he saw her face. It was that of Mme. de Benserade, only she looked at least ten years older than when he saw her last. [She looked at him for an instant, but probably did not recognize him, for she passed quietly on.

"Do you know who that lady is?" he inquired of the major-domo who was awaiting his order.

"A very wealthy Austrian countess who arrived here last evening with her husband and two servants. They drink only champagne of the finest quality—we have all the best brands. Monsieur has only to choose, Moët, Clicquot—"



"We will decide that presently. That is the lady's husband with her, is it not?"

"Yes, sir. They are going to make an excursion to the glacier without guides. The count seems to be a very peculiar man. Only this morning he was talking of going alone with his wife as far as the Jardin. But I represented to him that the road was too dangerous and I hope he will be content with a visit to the *crevasses*. Will monsieur now order breakfast?"

"Give us anything you happen to have," said Chantal, brusquely, for all his interest in that meal had suddenly deserted him.

This unexpected meeting had taken away all his appetite; besides, he wondered what the consequences would be if Dartige and his wife should suddenly find themselves face to face with this Austrian count and countess, whom he so strongly suspected of having changed not only their name but nationality.

He had not seen the husband, so he ran to the window to catch a glimpse of him, if possible. The window overlooked the glacier, but the couple had walked quickly, and they were now at the foot of the moraine, and too far off for Chantal to distinguish their faces.

Just then Dartige and his wife came in, and Andrea asked to be shown to a room in order to arrange her toilet a little.

"Have you seen any one you know?" Chantal asked, as soon as he was alone with his friend.

"Do you suppose I have been amusing myself by staring at the passers-by? I have had eyes only for the marvelous scene before me."

"Marvelous it is unquestionably, but not so marvelous as finding Monsieur and Madame de Moulieres here."

"What do you mean?"

"I recognized the lady perfectly, but I am not so sure about the gentleman. Stay, you have an excellent field-glass. Hand it to me, I can see my man distinctly now. It is Moulieres. He has let his beard grow, but he has not been able to change his hooked nose."

Dartige looked through the glass in his turn, and then said:

"Yes, you are right; and the lady he holds by the hand is certainly Madame de Benserade. What are they doing here?"

"They have come to spend their honeymoon possibly, though, to judge from appearances, it is not a very blissful one. The former baroness wears a very rueful visage. One would think that she was afraid of her husband."

"Where is he taking her?"

"To some part of the glacier which prudent tourists never visit without guides, I believe."

"The path seems to be a very difficult one. See, they are disappearing now behind that enormous block of ice. I did not suppose that Moulieres was so venturesome."

"He perhaps has his reasons for making this perilous excursion. But I am curious to know what he calls himself now. His name must be on the register. Let us go and see."

Chantal led Dartige to the reception-room, and the two friends began to examine the register.

"Good!" Chantal exclaimed, at last, "he is a Prussian now. This



certainly caps the climax. Here it is, written in German, too. See: Graf und Gräfin von Weissbach—Count and Countess de Weissbach. What do you think of that?"

"I think, with you, that this caps the climax. But see, there are a few lines, written in French, under it—the translation of the title perhaps."

"It was not Moulieres who wrote them there, but his wife. She returned for the express purpose. Let us see what she says to travelers. Ah! the deuce! I thought as much!" exclaimed Chantal, pushing the book toward Dartige, who read:

"If I should not return from the excursion my husband compels me to make, it will be because he has thrown me down some precipice. My will, which makes him my sole legatee, will be found in his pocket."

"It is signed Juliette," continued Chantal. "She knows that Moulieres wishes to get rid of her, and though she has not the courage to resist him, she has done this in order that her death may be avenged."

"But we must inform the proprietor of the inn, so he can send guides in pursuit of the wretch."

"And if the Benserade should be mistaken, a nice scrape we should get ourselves into by our false accusation. Let us first see where they are," said Chantal, returning to the dining-room window. "Give me your glass a moment. I do not see them now. What has become of them? Has the crime been committed already? No, there they are, just where the river of ice makes a curve. In another moment they will be lost to view. The lady does not seem to advance very cheerfully—the husband is leading her by the hand—where they are now, the persons who are crossing the glacier in front of the hotel can not see them, and Moulieres little suspects that I do not lose a single one of his movements, thanks to your glass. Ah! the lady pauses—she can go no further. Her husband releases his hold upon her hand, to rest, also. After all, he has no evil designs perhaps."

"I told you so," murmured Dartige.

"I begin to think so myself," replied Chantal, without ceasing to watch however. "Juliette is leaning forward to look down into a *crevasse* probably. Now Moulieres, too, is stooping. He is trying to explain the theory of the glacier perhaps. Look, now he straightens himself up and passes his arm around her waist. The devil take me if I don't believe he is going to kiss her. It would be a charming tableau, but—good God!"

"I saw two black specks a moment ago; but now I can see nothing. What has happened?" cried Dartige.

"Exactly what I predicted, but what Moulieres was totally unprepared for. He pushed his wife down into the *crevasse*, but in falling she clung to him, and now they are at the bottom of the abyss."

"We must send some one to their assistance immediately."

Just then the proprietor entered.

"A frightful accident has occurred!" cried Dartige. "That German count and his wife have fallen into a *crevasse*. Send some guides to their assistance."



"Guides can do nothing for them now, sir. The *crevasses* on that side are hundreds of feet in depth, and never yield up their prey. The bodies will be found at the foot of the glacier twenty years hence. Still that makes no difference. I will send out a party of guides with ropes and ladders. Such accidents do us a great deal of injury. Still, there are plenty to testify that no one here at the hotel was to blame. The count would persist in going alone in spite of our protests, and in spite of the entreaties of his countess, the servants told me."

"Don't stop to talk, but call the guides," interrupted Chantal.

"Are you going to tell your wife?" Chantal asked, when he was again alone with his friend.

"Heaven forbid! She is too excitable. She would be sure to have an attack of hysterics."

"Then we had better return to Chamouni directly after breakfast. She will hear of the event, but she will not know that her father's murderer has met with the fate he deserved. You can tell her after we have returned to France. Hush! here she comes."

"I am ready. You have decided to cross the Mer de Glace, I hope," Andrea remarked, as she approached them.

"I can not say that I am very anxious to do it," replied Chantal. "It has just swallowed up a German family—husband and wife. I should fancy that I was treading upon their lifeless bodies."

"A husband and wife! Oh, that is horrible!" exclaimed Andrea, with an eloquent look at Dartige. "Let us leave this place, Albert. I will not remain here a minute longer."

Dartige was equally anxious to leave the scene of the catastrophe, but Chantal, who was nearly famished, insisted upon having breakfast, and they were obliged to gratify him.

It was not a cheerful repast by any means; and when our friends resumed their journey the guides had not succeeded in recovering the bodies.

But that evening, at Chamouni, every one was talking of the accident at Montauvert, and a rumor was already current that the Countess von Weissbach had been pushed into the chasm by her noble husband, for upon the hotel register had been found written proofs that she suspected the fate that awaited her.

M. and Mme. Dartige returned to Paris, and nothing has since occurred to mar their happiness.

Chantal, encouraged by their example, thinks strongly of getting married himself.

Clara Monti rests in Florence, where her compatriots have erected a magnificent monument to her memory.

Moulières and Juliette de Benserade will have no sepulcher but the glacier

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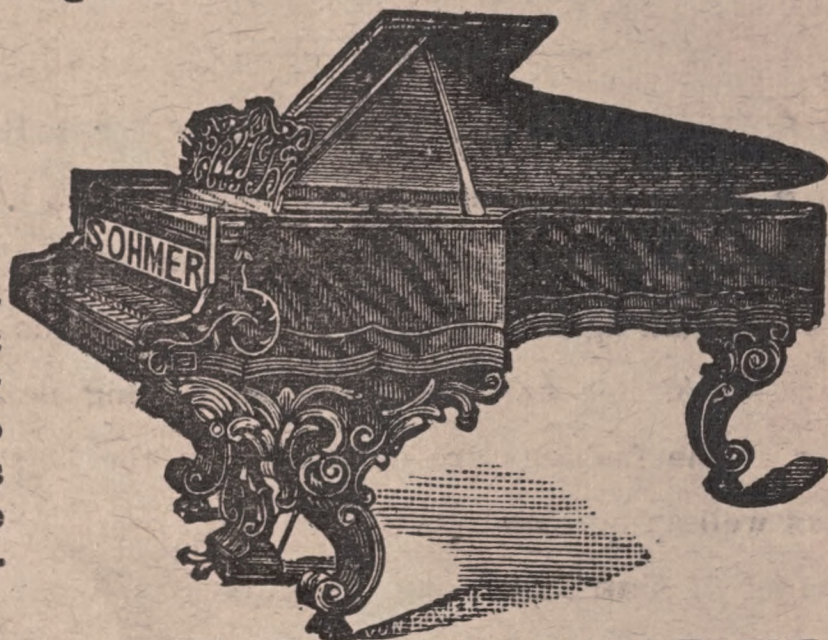
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